Servant Leadership and the True Parental Model:

A Construct for Better Research, Study and Practice

Joe Anderson
Regent University

This paper proposes the use of a True Parental Model as a construct for better research, study, and practice applicable to servant leadership. It will endeavor to introduce this model, explain its applicability for servant leadership, and provide evidence for the author’s belief that it is the most appropriate model for servant leadership research, study and practice. It also offers several areas of possible research and raises important issues and questions regarding education and training in servant leadership.

Introduction

This paper is written very much from a practitioner’s point of view. It is intended to influence how practitioners think about servant leadership and how they actually apply servant leadership in their organizations. It is also the intent of this paper to influence both researchers and academicians in the study and teaching of servant leadership as an indirect means of aiding practitioners. As such, this paper proposes the use of the True Parental Model as a construct for better research, study, and practice of servant leadership. It will endeavor to introduce this model, explain its applicability for servant leadership, and provide evidence for the author’s belief that it is the most appropriate model for servant leadership research, study and practice. While this paper is written from a practitioner’s point of view, it also offers several areas of possible future research and raises important issues and questions regarding education and training of future servant leaders.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a term first used approximately 35 years ago to introduce a unique style of leadership and leader. What makes servant leadership different is that it is follower-oriented rather than leader-oriented. The term servant leader was first used in the seminal work, Servant As Leader, published by Robert Greenleaf in 1970. According to the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, Robert Greenleaf described his concept in the following manner:

“The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. He or she is sharply different from the person who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to
acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve – after leadership is established. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.

The difference manifest itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived?”

Patterson (2004) quoting Stone, Russell, & Patterson (In Press) indicates that “servant leadership is about focus. The focus of the leader is on followers and his/her behaviors and attitudes are congruent with this follower focus. This is in deep contrast to the idea that servant leadership is merely a subset of transformational leadership where the focus of the leader is on the organization, or organizational objectives. Servant leadership stands alone in regard to this follower focus.” (Pg. 2)

It is generally accepted that servant leadership has been gaining additional recognition and wider acceptance by both academicians and practitioners alike. However, Laub (2003) contends that in reality, “most organizations today operate with a paternalistic view of leadership, and that, more than any other reason, hinders them from becoming true servant organizations.” (Pg.2) He also indicates that paternalistic leaders see themselves as parents and see their followers as children. (Laub, 2003) More importantly, Laub (2003) believes this parental view of leadership “leads to an unhealthy transactional leadership that operates more on compliance rather than true individual motivation.” (Pg.7) It is the contention of this author that the parental view of leadership is not wrong and that, in fact, it is the ideal model for servant leadership to emulate. What is actually wrong is the paternalistic model, not the parental model. To fully understand the difference requires that we first briefly look at the paternalistic model.

Paternal model

“Paternalism, whether by the state, the church, or business is as old as civilization. The feudal system was based on paternalistic ideals,” and these ideals were carried over into many early factories and businesses. (Wren 2005, Pg. 185) This ought not be surprising in that many of the earliest forms of business were often established and run by families. Fathers, or other male family members, normally served as the organizational leader. The paternal model used in business and commerce was simply a logical extension of the male dominated culture of the time (not that it isn’t today). As company size increased beyond the limitations of the family, supervisors having a measured degree of the owner’s authority, had to be brought in to help oversee the business. (Wren, 2005)

The paternalistic model is one in which the leader’s focus is clearly on the leader and the needs of the leader. Workers are viewed as children needing the parental direction, guidance and wisdom of the father, or as in the case of most modern businesses, the father figure of the organization. It is a model where the leader is seen as a benevolent ruler who makes all important decisions, controls all important information, does all the important thinking, and basically directs all the important activities of the organization as he (and occasionally as she) sees fit. Workers are there to do the work as directed and to seek information or solutions to problems from the leader.

Laub (2003) states that, “This type of leadership, even when revealed to be harmful and counterproductive, does not die easily... This Autocratic rule has always been around and is firmly with us today. However, paternalistic leadership holds the strongest influence in our organizations today. This model needs to be further explored and explained so that organizations can begin to accept its limitations and can move beyond it toward a servant-minded paradigm of leadership.” (Pg.12) This paper intends to do exactly that, but not by trashing the parental model as advocated by Laub. The premise of this paper is that the parental model and servant leadership are not mutually exclusive, and in fact, the True Parental Model is the perfect model for servant leadership. So how is this True Parental Model different from the paternalistic model?
**Paternalistic Model vs. True Parental Model**

Unfortunately, paternalism, as defined relative to leadership, carries a very negative, and unwarranted, connotation. It doesn’t have to be this way! Laub (2003) recognizes this: “The paternalistic leader can be either negative or positive but they still remain firmly in the parent role.” (Pg. 5) Laub (2003) goes on to contend “that many, if not most, of the organizations that see themselves as servant organizations are, in fact, a positive version of a paternalistic organization.” In essence he is saying that organizational leaders that think they are servant leaders clearly believe they are moving toward servant leadership by leaving the negative aspects of paternal leadership behind and moving toward the more positive paternalistic model. This author contends that they have shifted to a more positive model and, in so doing, have moved closer to servant leadership even though retaining a parental (though paternalistic) model. Leaders in these organizations clearly believe they have corrected some of their sins of commission.

The following are this author’s view of two of the major sins of commission existing in the negative paternalistic model that need to be corrected to move towards a True Parental Model:

- It is static regarding follower growth and maturity: The children in the negative paternalistic model never grow up to be adults, yet in a True Parental Model this is not the case. Children do grow up. Children do mature. Children do become adults (and adults do become parents).
- It is standardized in its treatment of the children: There is no consideration for seeing followers as individuals with different needs, yet in a True Parental Model this is not the case. Not only do children grow and mature at different rates, they have different personalities, skills, abilities and interests and good parents treat them accordingly.

In essence, normal paternalistic leadership is a form of negatively implemented parental leadership - - a form of parental leadership that is done poorly. It ought to not be surprising that we have dysfunctional organizations for some of the same reasons we have dysfunctional families. Poor parenting can result from doing wrong things that need to be done right. It can also come from sins of omission – failing to do things we ought to be doing. Such is the case for the paternalistic model as it relates to a True Parental Model.

The fatal flaw of the paternalistic model is both simple and profound at the same time. It clearly is a sin of omission. The fatal flaw of the paternalistic model is that it is fatally incomplete. It is paternalistic and, by definition, therefore, fails to include the maternal aspects of the True Parenting Model, what this author refers to as the softer side of parental leadership. By including the maternal aspects of parenting to the paternal aspect of parenting, we have a complete and True Parental Model and one that is fit to be used as a meaningful construct for better research, study, and practice applicable to servant leadership.

This conceptual relationship of the paternal and maternal aspects of the True Parental Model, and the subsequent impact on the quality of servant leadership, is shown in Figure 1: Servant Leadership Quality Matrix Using the True Parental Model. As the quality of parental attributes increases the overall quality of servant leadership (and the parental model) increases. Similarly, as the quality of maternal attributes increases the overall quality of servant leadership (and the parental model) also increases. When both paternal and maternal aspects of the model increase, the servant lead organization (or family) has the potential to reach levels of quality unobtainable in the absence of either. In other words, even if implemented perfectly, paternal aspects of the parental model alone can never reach a level of “very good” or “excellent” on the chart. Likewise, even if implemented perfectly, maternal aspects alone can never reach a level of “very good” or “excellent” on the chart. This relationship is true both in servant-lead organizations and families alike. (This relationship is also why it is so difficult for single parents to do all the paternal and maternal things well enough to reach the level of quality desired for their families.)

The main reason one can have complete confidence in the True Parental Model is because it did not originate with man. It originated with God when he created the first organization, the family, and He designed families so as to have both maternal and paternal aspects of leadership present. To reflect the complete servant leadership nature of God, He created both Adam and Eve, and it was to them both that He gave the human mission. Specifically scripture states:

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of
God created him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:26-28)

God clearly knew that Adam would need Eve to help in raising their children and for leading the family organization. “And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.” (Genesis 2:18) Adam’s paternal attributes were necessary, but not sufficient for mission accomplishment. He needed Eve’s maternal attributes in order to do all that they were to do in order to fulfill God’s plan.

Reasonable questions at this point would be:

- What are the attributes of good parents and, therefore, good servant leaders?
- What type behaviors might be evident for each attribute?
- Which of these attributes are predominantly paternal?
- Which attributes are predominately maternal?
- Are some attributes both paternal and maternal?

Figure 2: Attributes of Good Parents/Servant Leaders, attempts to summarize the answers to all these questions. It presents 18 attributes for good parents and servant leaders alike. Those which this author believes are predominately paternal are annotated with a superscript letter (p). Those which appear to be predominately maternal are annotated with a superscript letter (m). Those which appear to be equally both paternal and maternal are annotated with a superscript letter (b). What is truly interesting is that while only 5 of the 18 are viewed as part of the paternal model, 15 of the 18 fall within the maternal model.

To the extent the list of attributes is reasonably complete and the paternal-maternal designations are fairly accurate, several issues come to mind. First the list may explain why the paternalist model still carries such influence today and dies so slowly as posited by Laub (2003). We ought not to be surprised that the paternalistic model still dominates organizations today and dies so slowly. The paternalistic model is focused on fathers and it is men that have been running the show for centuries! This is what would be expected in a highly male dominated culture. Secondly, this may explain, in part, why it has taken so long for servant leadership to take hold and why significant resistance for the softer side of leadership continues even today. The gains seen in the acceptance of servant leadership so far may be a direct result of having more women in the workforce today than in the 1970s, first as workers and, to a more limited degree later, as managers and leaders. It is no coincidence that servant leadership as reflected in the proposed parental model has gained wider acceptance in the past 30 years as more and more women are actively engaged in the workforce as leaders (who naturally and by nurturing are more familiar with care-giving roles) and as followers (having greater care-giving expectations of their leaders). One could even posit that having more women in the higher circles of academia may also have had a similar impact on the study and research associated with the growth of servant leadership. Without this strong influx of women into these male dominated business and academic institutions, it is not hard to imagine that servant leadership may have been just another good idea that went the way of the horse and buggy. The third major implication regarding these attributes is one related to global cultures in general. While the United States remains a strongly male-dominated society, it is clearly, albeit slowly, moving toward a more balanced culture. In other extremely paternalistic cultures women are often treated as slaves, or even worse, as mere property. The successful application of servant leadership in such cultures, even if it works better than other alternatives, may simply not be possible until after a massive paradigm shift in culture has already taken place. For some US companies with global operations this may mean using servant leadership at home and paternalistic leadership in selective locations elsewhere.

The Parent-Child relationship

The next important step in the discussion of the True Parental Model as a construct for servant leadership is that of the parent-child relationship. Laub (2003) is very critical of this relationship and sees it as unhealthy for the organization. He prefers a more healthy organization: “one in which people serve the interests of others above their own self-interests for the good of the organization as a whole. This is a servant organization in which all people talk and act as adults and partners for the good of each person and the organization as a whole.” (Pg. 10) Unfortunately treating everyone as adults can be as organizationally toxic as treating everyone
as children. What is needed is that they are each treated as individuals: unique in personality, values, beliefs, background, culture, spiritual maturity, etc. Laub’s (2003) position misses the extremely important point that all people start off as children and all children start off as babies. As much as we might want to treat them as adults right out of the womb, it takes deliberate care and nurturing for new babies to reach the point of adulthood. The same is true in organizations. Not all workers enter the organization as organizational adults. Some are raised in the organization and some are even born in the organization. What good servant leaders (i.e., good parents) do is treat each worker (baby/child/adult) as a unique individual. The Apostle Paul was working with physically adult people when he said “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. (1 Corinthians 3:2). Paul wisely recognized that though they physically were adults they were still spiritually babies. The same can occur with adults who are organizationally still babies. Servant leaders must be as wise as Paul in knowing the difference.

The parent-child relationship of the True Parental Model has even more implications for servant leadership. By examining just a few things good parents do for their children we can see the serious implications for organizational servant leadership that comes with the True Parental Model. So what do good parents do during the stages of a child’s development and growth into adulthood that servant leaders should do in their organizations? Figure 3: Parental Actions for Servant Leaders, attempts to capture some of these actions. Those marked with an asterisk are continuous. While these are intentionally worded as parental, they are directly applicable to servant leadership in the work environment. It is also possible to visually see that the real work is in the earliest years but this work yields a significant return on investment for both for both parents and servant leaders. Like being a parent, being a servant leader is very hard work!

As is evident from the previous sections, the essence of the True Parental Model is all about attitudes and relationships between servant leaders and their followers. It is the contention of this author that spiritual maturity of the leader and follower are important to the quality of these organizational relationships just as they are in families. In fact, the most important differentiation in the quality of these relationships between servant leader and follower may well be the spiritual formation of those involved in these relationships. If an organization employs many spirit-filled individuals (as both leaders and followers) it is the contention of this author that the quality of the organization’s relationships will be far better. Figure 4: Servant Leadership Relationship Quality Matrix, attempts to demonstrate this concept. If both leader and follower are spiritually immature (i.e., negatively like minded), there exists little opportunity for a quality leader-follower relationship. If either the follower or leader is spiritually mature it is envisioned that a greater opportunity for a quality leader-follower relationship is present. Lastly, if both leader and follower are spiritually mature (i.e., positively like minded) there exists much greater opportunity for a quality leader-follower relationship to exist. However, to reach true maturity in spiritual formation requires the indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God, something over which neither leader nor follower have control. What can be controlled is the selection of leaders to ensure that the leaders share the same values as those of the organization. As Winston (2002) states, “leadership starts with values.” (Pg. 1) It is up to these leaders to then ensure that, to the greatest extent possible, follower values align with those of the organization and its leadership.

The Real Importance of the True Parental Model

The first organization God created was the family, and it is still first in the heart of God today. If leaders have not learned to first lead their families correctly, they will have serious difficulty implementing effective servant leadership in their work organizations. There are far too many instances where leaders, especially Christian men, are so focused on the temporal organizations of this world, that they have failed to lead in the organization which God first created and which will extend into all eternity, the family. The real leadership crisis in this country today is not at General Motors or Ford. It is not at the Department of Defense, the City of New York, or even Enron. It is in the family. More often than not, people that are good servant leaders are also good parents because they first exercised good leadership skills at home before taking them “on the road.”

Implications for research

The value of research, either directly or indirectly is in its ability to favorably impact the work of practitioners. What practitioners need from research is truth. So what is this truth? The Bible tells that Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6) If literature or research excludes Jesus Christ and His involvement in the affairs of men, it excludes the truth by default and therefore has little if any true value to practitioners.
Mixing nonsensical secular wisdom of men with Godly wisdom as evidence for, or proof of, any course of action for practitioners is a serious mistake. Scripture clearly warns: “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)

Much of the current literature and resulting advice for practitioners is based on fatally flawed research from which there is no chance of recovery possible. Research that excludes God and His impact upon our world is junk science and scholastic fraud in the highest degree. “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.” (Psalms 14:1) While we must always be careful of research and how much credence we place in its results, research can be of some value to practitioners and academicians alike – when done correctly. However, practitioners should not implement servant leadership or the True Parental Model because research says it works, or because research says it will make a company more profitable or make an organization more effective, or because research says it is easier. Practitioners should implement servant leadership or the True Parental Model because it is the right thing to do. It is in doing the right things that we are blessed to have better performance, not because we have proved it through research. The secular world will always want substantial evidence to prove that servant leadership and the True Parental Model are effective, whereas Christian leaders must “walk by faith not by sight”, and faith is evidence! “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) Nonetheless, there are areas related to the True Parental Model and its application to servant leadership that may be of value to researchers and also to those that live and die by the results of research.

- Confirm the role spiritual formation plays in the quality of relationships between servant leaders and their followers.
- Determine the degree to which the maternal attributes identified in Figure 2 are evident in servant lead organizations.
- Determine the degree to which the maternal attributes identified in Figure 2 are evident in non-servant lead organizations.
- Evaluated servant lead organizations to determine if any have been successful using only a paternalistic model.
- Determine how courses focused on family leadership might impact the overall leadership formation process for students (not just students studying leadership).

Teaching and training

The greatest failure in teaching organizational leadership is also the greatest challenge. It is the contention of this author that there is no better place to learn about, implement, and practice the fundamentals of servant leadership than in the family environment. Even students that have never been in business are well aware of their own family environment and can relate to the relationship of parents and children, even when they have never been parents. If students are also parents then they have already seen the parent-child relationship from both sides of the relationship. These students are therefore even better prepared to see and understand the True Parental model and its application to organizational servant leadership. In addition, by first teaching leadership of the family, educational institutions can truly have a lasting impact on this world and this world’s institutions, especially if each of these students goes on to teach their children the same constructs and principles. Scripture tells us to “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6-6) For the purpose of this paper I am comfortable saying “train up a leader in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

Teaching organizational leadership in the family should be the core foundation on which all other leadership courses are taught. If we fail to do this, we are missing the most important area of Christian leadership needed to change the world. If we can teach young people how to be excellent parents, we will have taught them how to be excellent servant leaders. In most cases they will be parents before being organizational leaders. The skill sets, attitudes, precepts and constructs applicable for excellence in servant leadership are the same as the skill sets, attitudes, precepts and constructs applicable for excellence in parenting. Current organizational leadership theory and its supporting literature focus almost exclusively on our leadership responsibilities in the workplace when our first leadership responsibilities are in the family. It is still the family,
not General Motors, that has the God-given mission to, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:28) In fact, this author contends that a person cannot be an effective Christian leader without first becoming an effective leader of his or her own family.
References

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Figure 1:

Servant Leadership Quality Matrix
Using the True Parental Model
Figure 4:
Servant Leadership Relationship Quality Matrix