Can the Positive Impact of Servant Leaders be associated with Behaviors Paralleling Followers’ Success?


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Given the ever-advancing technology, growing global competitiveness, and uncertain economic and ethical climates, leaders are globally faced with declining hope and confidence in themselves and their associates. Thus, it seems though the need for values-based leadership, like servant leadership, is not only restricted to societal and/or political levels. This probably explains why the understanding, the developmental processes, and the implementation of such needed values-based leadership approaches remain under-researched in the fields of leadership and emerging positive psychology movements. The perceived void in academic and organization behavior combined with the recent work on leadership and positive psychology led to joined forces toward positive approaches to leadership and its development.

With the dawn of the twenty-first century, traditional, autocratic and hierarchical styles of leadership were (and still are) slowly yielding to a newer and more contemporary type of model, one that attempts to simultaneously enhance the personal and professional growth of employees, while at the same time improving the quality and caring of many organizations through (a) the combination of teamwork and community; (b) seeking to personally involve others in decision making; and (c) is strongly based in ethical and caring behavior. This emerging approach to leadership and service is called servant-leadership (Spears, 1996).

In a recent study on effective leadership, Higgs (2003) concludes that the past 50 years of research have steered society down the road of ineffective measures of “leadership effectiveness”. Higgs (2003) associates the problem with the erroneous leadership determinants, that were largely used during this period, to define leadership success. Instead of using short-term determinants such as market share growth, financial improvement, decreased turnover, and reduced absenteeism, real leadership success should be measured by the degree to which it contributes to creating and building
a sustainable long-term asset – follower capacity (Higgs, 2003). This view of leadership effectiveness constitutes the foundation of the servant leadership notion.

Despite the growing importance of the human aspect in changing and modern organizations, past research tended to apply a systems, or macro approach, paying little attention to human attitudes or behaviors (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Stanley, Meyer & Topolnytsky, 2005). Therefore, Pirola-Merlo, Hartel, Mann and Hirst (2002) propose that the need for research into the emotional aspects of work is urgent and the lack of it is hampering progress in understanding organizational behavior. Johnson and Indvik (1999) explain that in past decades employees were expected to leave their emotions at home as rationality was the tone of most organizational environments. Scholars propose leadership research has focused quantitatively on the leader’s external behavior (Yukl, 2002) and emphasized cognitive traits (Lord & Brown, 2001), while the investigation of the emotional processes of leaders has been largely neglected.

Albrow (1992) suggests that feelings may be viewed as interfering with rationality and effective decision-making which probably causes it to be ignored in the literature. Advances in understanding emotions have challenged this view. Researchers have determined that emotional processes precede, or at least accompany cognition (Dickman & Stanford-Blair, 2002; Massey, 2002). Concerning this, Massey (2002, p. 20) states: “it is generally the case that unconscious emotional thoughts will precede and strongly influence our rational decisions”. Evidently the organizational literature has therefore been cognitively dominated and inundated by numerous research covering this area (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005a, b; Ilgen & Klein, 1989).

In light of the above-sketched situation, one of the meaningful, more recent developments within the field of industrial and organizational (I/O) psychology, and more specifically in the area of organizational behavior (OB), has been the identification of new approaches to research to add to the existing body of knowledge. The positive organizational scholarship (POS) movement, as new development in the organizational behavior domain, is such an approach. Researchers have recently begun to investigate dynamics in organizations that lead to the development of human strength, resiliency, and extraordinary performance (Cameron & Caza, 2002). The focus of this work centres on life-giving, elevating elements in organizations that have been ignored largely by organizational scholars. According to Cameron, Dutton and Quinn (2003) POS is largely (and primarily) concerned with the investigation of positive outcomes, processes, and attributes of organizations and their employees. Contrary to traditional organizational studies, POS studies focus on employees’ strengths, and psychological capabilities. This emphasis parallels the new positive psychology movement that has shifted from the traditional emphasis on illness and pathology, toward a focus on human strengths and virtues (Seligman, 2000). According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) the consideration of issues such as joy, happiness, hope, faith, and the worth of living represents a shift from reparative
psychology to a psychology of positive experience (Cameron & Caza, 2002). In this regard, Seligman (2000, p. 8) states the following:

[Positive] psychology is not just the study of disease, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is wrong; it is also building what is right. [It] is not just about illness or health; it is about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play.

Thus, POS takes classic questions, such as those of organizational leadership and design, and uncovers new understanding by examining positive processes that emphasize the realization of potential patterns of excellence. Consistent with this new movement, a group of organizational scholars has begun to investigate the positive side of organizational processes and performance, including how individuals in organizations, as well as the organizations themselves, become exceptional and virtuous (Cameron & Caza, 2002). Regarding this Cameron et al., (2003, p. 10) state the following:

...by unlocking capacities for elements such as meaning creation, relationship transformation, positive emotions cultivation, and high quality connections, organizations can produce sustained sources of collective capability that help organizations thrive.

Although implied in the abovementioned statement, some deliberation is needed to establish the nature of the link between POS and other OB constructs, as well as the application thereof in the organizational context.

Furthermore, and of central importance for this proposed study, is whether the concept of servant leadership (SL) could be considered a feasible research avenue to be pursued within the field of POS – and if so, what the (positive) impact of the servant leader can be on followers’ successful behavior. Literature within the POS paradigm indicates that research on positive constructs and emotions, as applied in this domain, have been relatively recent. Concerning this, Bagozzi (2003, p. 176) argues:

...there is still much to be learned from positive organizational scholarship into what it is about work that makes life worth living and how positive emotions and outcomes contribute to this.

However, within the developing positive psychology movement, and parallel with the positive organizational behavior/scholarship field (Luthans, 2001; 2002a,b; Luthans & Jensen, 2001), it could be reasoned that the notion of servant leadership fits with the positive approach to leadership or PAL, as advocated by Luthans, Luthans, Hodgetts and Luthans (2002) and Peterson and Luthans (2003). This seems to be true due to the relationship between the behavior of servant leadership and the development of positive emotions in people. Emotions and the importance of emotions play a substantial role in the thinking of scholars working in the POS frame of reference.
Previous research indicate that the overall balance of people’s positive and negative emotions is reflective of their subjective well being (Ashkansky, Härtel & Daus, 2002; Bagozzi, 2003; Diener, 2003; Fredrickson, 2003). In this sense Fredrickson (2003) argues that positive emotions signal, and could also produce, optimal individual functioning that may consequently contribute to optimal organizational functioning. Fredrickson (2003, p. 164) states: “Organizational members should consider cultivating positive emotions in themselves and others, not just as end-states in themselves, but also as a means to achieving individual and organizational transformation and optimal functioning over time”. In this regard Fredrickson (2003) postulates the ‘broaden-and-build’ theory, suggesting that positive emotions broaden people’s modes of thinking and action. Over time this capacity fosters people’s ability to pursue personal and social resources. These resources function as “reserves” which people can later draw on to help them survive and succeed. In addition, individuals’ experiences of positive emotions can be reaffirmed through other organizational members, and across interpersonal transactions with customers. As a consequence, positive emotions may also fuel optimal organizational functioning, helping organizations to thrive as well in the process (Fredrickson, 2003).

In addition to research conducted by Fredrickson, Bagozzi (2003) has attempted to demonstrate the importance of emotions within the field of POS by investigating the important consequences for people and organizations of certain positive and negative emotions, the action tendencies, and the coping responses functioning to manage them. In a study by Verbeke, Belschak and Bagozzi (cited in Bagozzi, 2003, p. 191) the emphasis was on emotional competence (conceived as a configuration of seven proficiencies), which described a person’s working model of managing emotions within interpersonal situations. It was found that people differ in their emotional competencies, and that these competencies enhance coping with emotions, promote social capital, and positively influence performance. Furthermore, subsequent to this research, Bagozzi (2003, p. 193) accentuates the need for continued research in this domain by stating that:

Emotional self-regulation and managerial responses to emotions and the things that produce them promise to be new frontiers for research and practice in the years ahead. More thought and research are needed into individual differences, interpersonal, small-group, organizational and cultural forces shaping this generation and management of emotions in the workplace.

Therefore, the aim of positive psychology is “to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Positive psychology is thus seen in stark contrast to what Maslow (1954, p. 354) lamented as psychology’s main preoccupation with disorder and dysfunction:

The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side. It has revealed to us much about man’s shortcomings, his illness, his sins, but little
about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations, or his full psychological height. It is as if psychology has voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction, and that, the darker, meaner half.

Since Maslow's (1954) view, positive psychology has emerged as a reaction to the preoccupation with what is wrong with people and their weaknesses, instead of what is right with people and building on their strengths. Positive organizational behaviour is therefore based on positive psychology.

Concluding from the above, it seems evident that social scientists, traditionally, have treated any "deviance" as a negative incongruity from normal or acceptable behaviour (Cameron & Caza, 2002). These “deviants” have traditionally been seen as requiring treatment or correction (Durkheim; Becker, cited in Cameron & Caza, 2002). For this reason, the idea of positive deviance has largely been ignored as a phenomenon for investigation (Starbuck; Pondy, cited in Cameron & Caza, 2002). Yet, according to Cameron and Caza (2002) positive deviance, in the form of virtuousness, captures some of humanity's highest aspirations. Virtue, in the Aristotelian sense, is an attribute that leads to a flourishing state exceeding normal happiness and excellence – analogous to ecstasy – while demonstrating the highest form of humanity – *eudaimonia* (Cameron & Caza, 2002).

*Eudaimonia* is a classical Greek word commonly translated as 'happiness' and refers to any conception of *ethics* that puts human happiness and the complete life of the individual at the center of ethical concern. Etymologically, it consists of the word "eu" ("good" or "well being") and "daimōn" ("spirit" or "minor deity", used by extension to mean one's lot or fortune). Although popular usage of the term *happiness* refers to a state of *mind*, related to *joy* or *pleasure*, *eudaimonia* rarely has such connotations. Thus, the less subjective "human flourishing" is often preferred as a translation.

Therefore, *eudaimonism* is a philosophy that originates in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* that defines correct actions as that which leads to greater "well being" of a human being. Thus, the hierarchy of human purposes aim at *eudaimonia* as the highest, most inclusive end or principal constituent. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is not established by honor, wealth, or power, but rather by rational activities in sync with virtue over a complete life. Aristotle is therefore seen as the model *eudaimonist*, and really the founder of *eudaimonism*. By extending well being from the narrowest concerns to the largest, all social rules can be adduced. For example, Aurelius Augustinus (aka Augustine of Hippo, or Saint Augustine, 354 – 430 AD) viewed as one of the most important figures in the development of Western Christianity, adopted the concept of *eudaimonism* as *beatitudo*, and Thomas Aquinas (aka Saint Thomas Aquinas, or Thomas of Aquino, 1225 – 1274 AD) - the Italian Roman Catholic priest, philosopher and theologian in the scholastic tradition, worked *eudaimonism* out into a Christian ethical format. For Thomas Aquinas, well-being is found ultimately in a direct perception of God, or complete blessedness. According to Schudt (2000), virtue (arete) - in the original Greek -
is applied to both individuals and organizations in recognition of the fact that virtue can be demonstrated at the individual and/or the collective level – though the idea that virtues can be applied to organizations in addition to individuals is sometimes controversial (Cameron & Caza, 2002).

Consistent with this perspective, recent research has begun to describe extraordinary organizations that display positive deviance (Cameron & Caza, 2002). They represent an affirmative exception to typical organizational behavior (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius & Kanov, cited in Cameron & Caza, 2002). Especially on the human dimension, Cameron and Caza (2002) maintain that these organizations engender virtuousness in relationships and in the treatment of people. An inexhaustive list of such examples include the following: When downsizing, they do so with caring and compassion. When recovering from crises they do so with maturity, wisdom, and forgiveness. When setting strategy they intend to do good as well as do well. Clearly, such organizations keep on flourishing, even in the face of difficult or tumultuous times.

To this end Cameron and Caza (2002) identify these organizations as virtuous organizations – fostering *eudaimonia*, since they possess attributes and demonstrate behaviors that extend beyond a consistent moral or ethical code. In addition, such organizations embrace more than core competence or capability, because they possess more than a strong, values-based culture – and therefore typically perform more than just “effectively”. These virtuous organizations seem to be unique, with regards to their capacity to create positive deviance (Sandage & Hill, 2001; McCullough, Pargament & Thoreson, 2000). Positive organizational scholarship (POS) emanates from this thinking, where POS is: “concerned primarily with the study of especially positive outcomes, processes, and attributes of organizations and their members” (Cameron et al., 2003, p. 4) and where “.... positive organizational scholarship is the study of that which is positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations” (Cameron & Caza, 2004, p. 739).

Looking at the servant leader, from this paradigm, s/he is seen as someone who is primarily interested in the needs and aspirations of others, especially in his/her followers. Servant leaders therefore try to influence followers towards behavior that will, for every individual, bring success, pleasure, flourishing (*eudaimonia*) and, above everything else, growth and development. In this way new leaders are developed. Servant leaders behave in this way because they have strong values, principles, and assumptions. They are essentially moral, ethical, altruistic, strive for stewardship, and feel themselves responsible for the development of the different forms of communities in which they move and are a part of. They feel a strong need to improve the situations in which they find their followers. Within this paradigm, it seems as if servant leadership is aimed at creating a positive view
of life among individuals in organizations – because servant leadership is by and large an approach to leadership that is firmly grounded in ethical principles.

**Defining positive psychology**

Linley, Joseph, Harrington and Wood (2006, p. 8) give an integrative definition for positive psychology as follows:

Positive psychology is the scientific study of optimal human functioning. At the meta-psychological level, it aims to redress the imbalance in psychological research and practice by calling attention to the positive aspects of human functioning and experience, and integrating them with our understanding of the negative aspects of human functioning and experience. At the pragmatic level, it is about understanding the wellsprings, processes and mechanisms that lead to desirable outcomes.

**Defining positive organizational behaviour (POB)**

Using the positive psychology movement as the foundation and point of departure, Luthans (2002b, p. 59) specifically defines positive organizational behaviour (POB) as:

...the study and application of positively-oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace.

Luthans (2002b) indicated that constructs that could be profitably studied by researchers in POB definitely include, and should include, leadership.

**Defining positive organizational scholarship (POS)**

Cameron et al. (2003, p. 4) define POS as being:

...concerned primarily with the study of especially positive outcomes, processes, and attributes of organizations and their members. POS does not represent a single theory, but it focuses on dynamics that are typically described by words such as excellence, thriving, flourishing, abundance, resilience, or virtuous. ... It encompasses attention to the enablers (e.g. processes, capabilities, structures, methods), the motivators (e.g. selflessness, altruism, contribution without regard to self), and the outcomes or effects (e.g. vitality, meaningfulness, exhilaration, high-quality relationships) associated with positive phenomena.

According to Luthans (2002b) the key conceptual difference from positive psychology, per se, and most of the macro-level POS phenomena, is that POB as defined above, focuses more on the micro level and focuses on the state-like, and open-to-development psychological capacities. According to Luthans (2002b) these states of POB are in contrast to the more trait-like dispositional characteristics given emphasis in positive psychology (Sandage & Hill, 2001; Seligman, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2002) and other positively-oriented concepts in the OB field, such as the “Big Five”
personality traits, positive self-evaluation traits, hard-wired positive emotions, and the emphasis on identifying people’s natural talents. Luthans (2002b) states that these variables are more concerned with the dispositional, trait-like positive characteristics, virtues, talents, and emotions of people, in contrast to the more situational, state-like, positive capacities of POB.

**Delineating servant leadership**

Within the emerging philosophy of servant leadership, emphasis is placed on the aspect that leadership makes the difference between one organization and another (Peck, 1995; Senge, 1990b; 1995; Snodgrass, 1993). The fulfilment of associates’ needs therefore becomes the ultimate goal of a servant-leader. Effective leadership is demonstrated minute by minute in the things that are being said, every day. People see, note and feel every action, and word being uttered. Therefore, any incongruity in what is seen, heard, and felt dissipates trust and leads to little or no commitment. The servant leader therefore has to instil commitment and confidence in their followers. Therefore, shared commitment grows out of servant leadership (McGee-Cooper & Looper, 2001).

Derived from the views on servant leadership, it seems to emphasize the importance of appreciating and valuing people, listening, mentoring or teaching, and empowering followers. Servant leaders gain influence from servanthood itself, as opposed to other leadership paradigms. It is also the latter aspect that differentiates servant leadership from other forms of leadership (Russell & Stone, 2002). In so doing, they allow freedom for followers to exercise their own abilities. They also place a much higher degree of trust in their followers than would be the case in any leadership style that require the leader to be directive to some extent.

In sum, the servant leader is a steward who holds the organization in trust to the public it serves, while remaining intimately attuned to the needs and situations of those who work in the organization – being sincerely committed to empowering others to succeed professionally and personally (Reinke, 2004). Osland, Kolb and Rubin (2001, p. 297) probably encapsulate this view most accurately with their statement that: “servant leaders are stewards who are responsible for serving, developing, and transforming the organization and its people”.

This leader-follower emphasis within the servant leadership framework is clearly illustrated by Berry, Parasuraman and Zeithaml’s (1994, p. 43) following definition:

**Improving service involves undoing what exists as much as creating what doesn't. Delivering excellent service requires a special form of leadership ... called servant leadership. Servant leaders serve the servers, inspiring and enabling them to achieve. Such leaders fundamentally believe in the capacity of people to achieve, viewing their own role as setting a direction and a standard of excellence, and giving people the tools and freedom to perform. Because these leaders believe in their people, they invest much of their personal energy**
coaching and teaching them, challenging them, inspiring them, and, of course, listening to them.

**Defining servant leadership**

Having looked into the Latin root of the word servant and exploring the existing literature on servant leadership, the author deduced a definition regarding servant leadership. Servant (from the Latin Servo) means to make safe, save, keep unharmed, preserve, guard, keep, protect, deliver, rescue. Thus, servant leadership, defined by the author is:

No more, and no less than, the conscious act that creates and inspires a follower. The servant leader leads by building shared trust, encouraging individuals to balance through the creation of meaningful work, meeting commonly agreed objectives, sharing commonly held values, and through the unconditional acceptance of others. Consequently, the servant leader is seen as truly effective by her/his followers when s/he as leader, through transmitting values of service to followers, provides conspicuous evidence of truthful commitment to her/his followers by lifting (developing) others to new levels of possibility.

**Proposing a speculative conceptual model**

In considering the above, together with evidence of the limited research that has been conducted within the field of POS – with a specific emphasis on the positive impact or affect that servant leadership can have on followers’ successful behavior, a preliminary proposed model seemed justified. Thus, in an endeavour to address this proposition, the author has in this paper, reviewed preliminary evidence suggesting that the positive impact of the servant leader can possibly affect followers to behave successfully and consequently contribute to their experience of eudaimonia (or positive emotions). With this view in mind, the preliminary conceptual model is proposed.

Within this suggested model, positive impact (of the servant leader) is proposed as antecedent in establishing successful follower behavior and positive emotions, since positive affect has often been treated as an outcome rather than a predictor of the positive of life (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). Thus, potential benefits of positive affect, itself, have remained largely untested. Consequently, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) argue that research in this domain ought to address the potential causal role of positive affect in securing positive, flourishing, and life-giving dynamics in and throughout organizations. Cameron and Caza (2004) corroborate the importance for scholars and researchers to investigate, in rigorous, systematic, and enlivening ways the phenomena that are associated with these positive dynamics. However, due to the barriers to the rigorous examination of the positive phenomena (e.g. few measuring instruments, nonscientific labeling, and dominance of negative effects over positive effects), it takes a concerted effort to identify and systematically investigate positive phenomena (Cameron & Caza, 2004).
Nonetheless, examining the positive impact of the servant leader in this way opens a variety of new research questions and avenues on the positive emotions and successful behavior of followers. For example, servant leadership and its relationship to other variables, especially organizational variables, like emotional intelligence, the development of psychological strengths like hope, confidence, self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience in followers. Whether the way in which servant leaders accomplish their missions differs from the processes used by other kinds of leaders may also be a worthwhile research direction. Conversely, studying the antecedents of, and variables that are, important in the development of servant leadership can produce useful information on leadership in general – and also serve as a means to add to the advancement and development of POS in organizational context.

It is the author’s hope that this review stimulates research that examines each of these and other questions, in further detail.
References


