Servant Leadership:

A Theoretical Model

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This paper introduces a servant leadership theoretical model that specifically addresses phenomena not fully explained in the literature, leaving room for a new theory based on Kuhn's (1996) structure of scientific revolutionary approach. The theory of servant leadership is defined along with a presentation of a mode, which includes the following virtuous constructs: (a) love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, and (g) service. Concurrent research is discussed and further investigation is called for.

The question has been asked regarding the concept of servant leadership and if it is indeed a viable theory, a subset of another theory such as transformational leadership, or just merely a conceptual idea (Rainey & Watson, 1996: Pawar & Eastman, 1997). The need exists to define servant leadership and offer the academic community, as well as the corporate community, with a concrete perspective on what servant leadership actually is. Researchers have desired to measure the concept of servant leadership, however with no defined constructs, the measurement issue has been more dreamed about than an actual reality (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, in press). This article addresses this question by defining the theoretical basis for servant leadership and then clearly detailing the theoretical constructs that emerge by using the scientific revolutionary approach offered by Kuhn (1996) with his foundational work on scientific revolutions.

Leadership Perspective

Exclusive reliance on transformational leadership is undesirable and additional theoretical perspectives serve to augment a more comprehensive look at leadership in the organizational setting. According to Kuhn (1970, p.64) "in the development of any science, the first received paradigm is usually felt to account quite successfully for most of the observations"; however, Kuhn shows that when there are phenomena not explained with existing theory, new theory emerges.

The literature on leadership offers numerous theoretical perspectives to the understanding of leaders (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2002; Daft, 2002). While transformational leadership offers a viable approach, and appears to capture dominant thinking in leadership circles (Rainey & Watson, 1996: Pawar & Eastman, 1997), some authors suggest transformational leadership has limitations such as the vagueness of the theory which allows for an almost anything interpretation (Yukl, 2002). In particular, transformational leadership does not explain certain phenomena such as altruism to followers or humility, which leaves the door open for a new theoretical

understanding based on Kuhn's (1970) approach. With the evidence for need of additional theory, servant leadership offers a viable perspective to the organizational leadership literature.

Transformational leadership. Transformational leadership originated with James McGregor Burns (1978), extended by Bernard Bass (1985), and further defined by Bass & Avolio (1994). Transformational leadership offers an approach to leadership that is both easy to understand and applicable to most situations. According to transformational leadership, the leader inspires followers to reach higher than they originally anticipated; thus, due to the focus on the organizational objectives, follower commitment is built around the objectives and followers are empowered to reach those objectives (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Yukl, 2002).

Servant leadership. The premise of servant leadership is that the leader is one who seeks to serve, and that this serving is a natural component of the leader (Greenleaf, 1977; Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999). Somewhat paradoxical to the typical view of leadership, where the purpose is leading, servant leaders seek to serve first as the primary means of leading. Greenleaf offers that his servant leadership thesis is not particularly "popular" (2002, p. 24) due to the concept of servants becoming leaders; however, this author posits the idea that servant leadership offers a unique perspective to the theoretical arena in organizational leadership.

Definition of Servant Leadership

According to Stone, Russell, & Patterson (In Press) 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.

One may question, then, just what exactly servant leadership theory is. According to Patterson (2003) servant leadership is a virtuous theory. A virtue is qualitative characteristic that is part of one's character, something within a person that is internal, almost spiritual (Whetstone, 2001); a characteristic that exemplifies human excellence (Yu, 1998). Most notably in the field of virtues is Aristotle, who is credited with establishing the framework for virtue definition (Kennedy, 1995).

Virtue comes from the Greek word *arête,* meaning excellence. The Aristotelian virtue is defined as consisting of three elements: (a) good habits, (b) the middle ground between the extremes of too much and too little, and (c) a habit that is a firm and settled disposition toward choosing good (Kennedy). Virtue theory addresses the idea of doing the right things with a focus on moral character. Virtue does not answer the overall question of right or wrong, but rather, it seeks to do the right thing in a particular situation (Kennedy, 1995).

Considered the oldest tradition in Western philosophy, Virtue theory has its origins in Greek civilization, most notably in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Arjoon, 2000). A contemporary resurgence has occurred with emphasis focused on the rights of others, or, rather, with an emphasis on other people, bringing focus back to the investigation into virtue theory.

Arjoon (2000) proffers that virtue theory is valuable to leadership due to the focus on the common good, rather than of profit maximizing, therefore earning a place in leadership. Virtue theory allows leadership to be concerned with the dynamic interactions among organizational members. Whetstone (2001) states a virtue is a qualitative characteristic that is part of one's character, something within a person that is internal, almost spiritual; and further, that servant leadership is the preferred paradigm because servant leaders serve according to highly principled means.

Servant leadership encompasses seven virtuous constructs, which work in processional pattern (Patterson, 2003). These are (a) agapao love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, and (g) service. These constructs are virtues and become illuminated within a servant leadership context. See Figure 1. The following provides a discussion of each of the constructs of servant leadership.

Agapao love. Love is mysterious, a concept that in some circles has mystified for centuries and eluded a true conceptual definition (Myers & Shurts, 2002). Greenleaf (2002) states that love is indefinable, yet, it has manifestations that are infinite. A complex concept, love is constrained by multiple definitions and an assortment of typologies; however, the interest in the subject matter is nothing less that a 'psychological preoccupation', according to Myers & Shurts (2002).

Love is the cornerstone of the servant leadership/follower relationship, specifically *agapao* love, which according to Winston (2002) is *agapao* love, or the Greek term for moral love, meaning to do the right thing at the right time and for the right reasons. *Agapao* love means to love in a social or moral sense and includes "embracing the judgment and the deliberate assent of the will as a matter of principle, duty, and propriety" (p. 5).

This type of love applies to today's leaders, in that leaders must consider the needs of their followers. This love is shown by leaders who consider each person as a total person -- one with needs, wants, and desires. *Agapao* love is alive and well in organizations today and it is the foundation for what Winston (2002) calls the "platinum rule" (or do unto others as they would want you to do). *Agapao* love is consistent with servant leadership to the extent that servant leaders must have such great love for the followers that they are willing to learn the giftings and talents of each one of the followers. The leader that leads with *agapao* love has a focus on the employee first, then on the talents of the employee, and lastly on how this benefits the organization.

Ferch & Mitchell (2001) advocated love as a goal for leaders, whereby the leader is emotionally, physically, and spiritually present for the follower, furthermore, they point out that this relationship is reciprocal and includes the premise of challenging any behavior that is inconsistent with love. Crom (1998) agreed that servant leaders genuinely care for others and are interested in the lives of followers. Winston (2002) also advocated this approach in his work on the Beatitudes, specifically stating, "The call of *agapao* love in the organization is to go far beyond the seeing people as 'hired hands', to seeing them as 'hired hearts'" (p. 9). Servant leaders exhibit love by leading with feeling; this fosters understanding, gratitude, kindness, forgiveness, and compassion (Gunn, 2002). This love leads to serving the best interests of others, illuminating the corporate culture, and freeing the leader from self-doubt, self-criticism, and self-imposed limitations.

Servant leaders love unconditionally, genuinely appreciate followers, and care for their people (Russell, 2001; Russell & Stone, 2002). With this love, which stems from the servant leader's personal values—or virtues—servant leaders inspire hope and courage. Furthermore, the servant leader seeks to esteem and honor people. Wagner-Marsh and Conley (1999) stated that servant leadership teaches that humans have value in their own right.

Servant leaders exhibit love in numerous ways (Patterson, 2003). They show more care for the people than the organization's bottom line, are genuine and real without pretense, shows appreciation, celebrates milestones, is sympathetic, listens actively, communicates and is empathetic.

Humility. Humility is a paradoxical concept, in that humility is often viewed as low-regard, meekness, or permissiveness; however, humility ought to be regarded as the non-overestimation of one's merits, which is fitting for leaders who, within their organization, may have the greatest temptation to think themselves superior (Hare, 1996). While some consider humility a weakness, for Hare it is a virtue that means *not* over-valuing one's self; thus, it is a virtue that better enables its practitioners to respect the worth of all persons. The peculiarity of the virtue of humility is that if one is truly humble then one *cannot* esteem oneself (Bagger, 2002).

Humility is the ability to keep one's accomplishments and talents in perspective, which includes self-acceptance, and further includes not being self-focused but rather focused on others (Sandage & Wiens, 2001). Humility, therefore, is a peaceful virtue that rejects self-glorification (Lawrence, 2002). Bower (1997) linked servant leadership with the unassuming behavior of being humble; he believed that humility is a necessity for chief executives, or leaders. The virtue of humility causes one to consider moderation, to listen to the advice of others, and to come with the realization that the right use of power means rejecting the dictatorial (Harrison, 2002).

The servant leader is fair and humble (Pielstick, 2000), which is in agreement with Swindoll (1981), who stated a major characteristic of servant leaders is their ability to be vulnerable and humble. Servant leaders do not center attention on their own accomplishments, but rather on other people. Fairholm and Fairholm (2000), concur, with their statement that the servant leader's concentration on service limits the negative effects of self-interest, and humility counteracts that self-interest.

Servant leaders exhibit humility as listen willingly, feel accountable to those served and openly receive criticism and advice as a welcomed opportunity to better serve (Blanchard, 2000). Story (2002) proffers that humble behavior of this type builds consensus with followers. Collins (2001) adds that humility is characterized by compelling modesty, by shunning public adulation and not being boastful, by demonstrating calm determination, relying on inspired standards, setting up of successors for great success, and looking to the people of the company to appropriate that success.

Servant leaders are not arrogant (Crom, 1998), see things from another's perspective and show appreciation and respect for leadership within the organization. The servant leader is not interested in their image or in being exalted, being more interested in being accountable (Swindoll, 1981). Therefore, serving from an authentic desire to help others and searching for ways to serve others by staying in touch with people. Collins (2001) sees humility as a test of leadership, differentiating the good from the great.

Servant leaders realize they do not have all the answers. One of the greatest gifts a servant leader can give the follower is the gift of the self; this shows care and takes place with reverence, respect, and humility (Covey, 2002). Swindoll (1981) who stated that the giving of the self shows humility of the servant, also pointed out that this humility is not to be equated with poor self-esteem. For Swindoll, humility is consistent with a healthy ego. For this reason, servant leaders can be both confident and unassuming, maintaining a healthy self-image but not being haughty, arrogant, or pretentious (Bower, 1997).

Altruism. Scholarly interest in altruism dates back to the early 1800's, with debate and discussion as to a clear definition of the term and discussed widely in varied disciplines. In general, this research into altruism, according to Kaplan (2000), has been undertaken in the literature in order to understand motives and behaviors; thus altruism has been seen, in general, as a link between good motives and good behavior and has been explored on the individual level and as a human quality, yielding a general definition of altruism as helping others just for the sake of helping. Monroe (1994) and Kaplan (2000) believe altruism is that which benefits another person, however, often a risk or sacrifice is involved, and often this risk or sacrifice is against one's own personal interests.

Altruism, according to Monroe (1994), is not merely having good intentions or being well-meaning; altruism is more about concern for the welfare of another. DeYoung (2000) also concurred with the traditional view of altruism as an unselfish concern for others often involving personal sacrifice; however, he believed that the personal pleasure derived from helping others should also be included in our understanding of altruism. In contrast, Hattwick (1986) placed altruism at one end of the spectrum with personal self-interest at the other end. Altruism seeks the fulfillment of others with behavior directed toward the benefit of others and identifies this behavior as consistent with servant leadership. Bishop Desmond Tutu, Sam Walton, Mother Teresa, and Princess Diana are among Sosik's (2000) examples of altruistic people.

Servant leaders seek *radical equality* in the treatment of all people, which is an altruistic approach (Berry and Cartwright, 2000). Servant leaders look for an attitude of humility and modesty along with selflessness and altruism, an approach which seeks what is best for others rather than for the leader himself (Patterson, 2003). This altruistic approach is imperative to the servant leadership mentality.

Vision. Vision is most often regarded as the organizational vision, or a vision of the future destination of the organization. However, Patterson (2003) offers the servant leader's focus is on the individual member of the organization and the vision component is about how the organizational members future state. This vision refers to the idea that the leader looks forward and sees the person as a viable and worthy person and seeks to assist each one in reaching that state. Harvey (2001) saw this same ability as inherent in Greenleaf's (1977) formulation of servant leaders as healers, making the person whole by helping that person to because they help others attain the larger vision or purpose than they otherwise might be able to attain for themselves.

Being visionary is a way of looking at what one wants to be, or rather how we should be (Swindoll, 1981). Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) espouse vision as a fundamental aspect of servant leadership, as did Greenleaf (1977) who spoke of the primary question leaders must ask themselves, "Do the people they serve grow?" The futuristic state was very important to Greenleaf and asserted that servant leaders must also be preoccupied with the future (Buchen, 1998).

Servant leaders serve their people by fully concentrating on where things are headed, the future, and asks the difficult question if the constituents are being served with the end in mind. Servant leaders, in other words, should be able to see the handwriting on the wall and seek to serve the future, understand and listen to followers, and provide stewardship guided towards the future (Buchen, 1998). This visionary aspect also provides the means towards empowerment, knowing what is needed and why.

Patterson (2003) shows that servant leader's vision for others is about faith, seeing and speaking things as though they are or will be, which is a dream for the future (Bennett, 2001). This allows for the servant leader to cultivate a forward-looking atmosphere within the organization (Wis, 2002). This looking ahead, according to Melrose (1995), involves the servant leader to have faith and vision of not what is, but what can be, fostering a great capacity for growth on behalf of followers. A servant leader who is visionary senses the unknowable; the follower's potential and is able to help followers see the same thing, within the bigger picture (Wis, 2000).

This visionary process includes seeing each person's unique gifts and influences the decisions of the leader and helps the leader shape a plan for the future, all while asking if the people are being served. Patterson (2003) states that servant leaders learn to know people's abilities and see where they are headed in order to serve them. The visionary servant leader also is able to know the followers and help them develop a clear sense of purpose, direction, dignity and direction (Batten, 1998). Servant leaders enrich lives, build better human beings, and encourage people to become more than they ever believed, and that this is more than a job; this deep-rooted leadership is about mission, the mission to serve (Melrose, 1995).

Trust. Collins (2001) believed that leadership is about vision, but also it is equally about trust. Trust, according to Franta (2000) has been studied in a variety of disciplines, and has complicated the task of operationalizing a definition due to the constrained research and the varied approaches and the wide array of definitions on the subject. Thus, the making of an operational definition has become quite a momentous task. Franta (2000), however, has recognized the importance of trust in the organizational arena and identifies that integrity and showing concern for others are imperative in the trust relationship.

Congruent thinking by Harris (2002) shows the virtue of trust as being linked to integrity, respect for others, and service in the organization. Harris (2002) concurred, linking the virtue of trust to integrity, respect for others, and service in the organization. Trust is an essential component of the leader/follower relationship, according to Hunt, 2000, one that, according to Fairholm and Fairholm (2000), is an essential element of organizational culture. Franta (2000) likewise recognized the importance of trust in the organizational arena and shows that integrity and showing concern for others are imperative in the trust relationship. Leadership, specifically servant leadership, is based on trust (Fletcher, 1999).

Trust is a building block for servant leaders (Patterson, 2003), one that is an important element for the servant leader (Wis, 2002); this is due to the belief of the servant leader in trusting in others, which produces a standard of excellence for the entire organization. Respect for and goodwill towards others is the foundation on which trust is built, which is built on goodwill towards others according to Fairholm and Fairholm (2000); further, without trust, discord and disharmony exist.

Fletcher (1999) advocated that servant leadership's basis is trust, which is supported by Kezar (2002) who described a servant leadership philosophy as helping people to feel comfortable and creating an open environment where everyone has a voice, and everyone works collaboratively and collectively while using skills such as truth telling. Russell (2001) concurs, noting that trust is essential for servant leaders and that the values of integrity and honesty build interpersonal and organizational trust and leads to credibility. Patterson (2003) offers that trust is a building block to work from for servant leaders, a trust in the unseen potential of the followers, believing they can accomplish goals, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Story (2002) agrees, noting that trust is an essential characteristic of the servant leader.

Servant leaders lay the foundation of trust, do what they say they are going to do, seek to instill trust rather than fear and focus on being trustworthy (Melrose, 1995; Patterson, 2003). According to Melrose, servant leaders know that when mistakes are made, people learn and grow together and that this can create confidence and trust, a bond that ties the organization together. The trust bond nurtures teamwork, confidence, self-esteem, and even self-actualization for the followers. Patterson (2003) states that servant leaders build environments of trust allowing truth, an open door and for clarity in communications, both upwards and downwards. Patterson (2003) also notes that the trusting leader is one who empowers followers and the empowered workforce is a workforce that has the freedom to serve the organization as well as the people who form the organization.

Empowerment. Greenleaf has been called "the father of the empowerment movement" because empowerment is one of the most important characteristics of servant leadership (Buchen 1998; Russell & Stone 2002). Veronesi (2001) explained that there is no servant leadership where there is no sharing of power. Empowering people, with the best interest of those served in mind, is at the heart of servant leadership (Veronesi; Kezar 2002). Empowerment is entrusting power to others, really giving it away (Patterson, 2003); and involves effective listening, making people feel significant, putting an emphasis on teamwork, and valuing of love and equality (Russell & Stone, 2002). In addition, servant leaders also empower by teaching and developing people (Russell & Stone). The servant leaders' satisfaction comes from the growth of others and that they are willing to hold themselves accountable for the results (Blanchard, 2000). Bennett (2001) stated that servant leaders need to know their followers and understand their needs for the knowledge and experience that they acquire through empowerment.

Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) stated that servant leaders empower followers in accordance with acting on their values and that this relationship is transforming. The idea of empowerment and servant leadership go hand in hand, in that servant leadership puts an emphasis on service, a wholistic approach to work, personal development, and shared decision-making (Lee & Zemke, 1993). Empowering followers is a major goal of servant leaders, who desire to create many leaders at all levels (Russell, 2001). Melrose (1995) believed that servant leadership involves giving people chances to move into new and more powerful roles by preserving their roots, respecting their value, and preserving their dignity.
In this empowerment-rich model of servant leadership, the leader empowers followers to find their own paths, and they, in turn, are inspired to help others find their best paths. Empowerment involves helping clarify expectations, goals, and responsibilities, and even more importantly it means letting people do their jobs by enabling them to learn, grow, and progress, and it means allowing for self-direction and freedom to fail; all of this multiplies the followers' strengths and trust (Melrose, 1995).

By empowering followers, servant leaders are allowing them freedom to proceed toward their goals, helping them make dreams reality. Empowerment is giving up control and letting the followers take charge as needed. Throughout this process, the servant leader is channeling followers, is balancing the growth of followers, and is aware of what is best for the follower. This empowerment allows the follower to bloom and grow.

Service. *A virtue is displayed, according to Arjoon (2000) when one is doing something deliberately with a desire to perform as human beings ought, that is, in the proper way. Such is the case with servant hood. Service is the heart of servant leadership theory; it is the primary function of a type of leadership that is not based on one's own interests but rather on the interests of others (Farling, Stone, & Winston 1999). Russell and Stone (2002) concurred that service is the core of servant leadership and, further, that this service is a choice of the interests of others over self-interest. Servant leaders know that they are servants first (Greenleaf, 1977; Buchen, 1998).*

This calling to serve is seen as a life mission and induces an acceptance of the responsibility for others (Wis, 2002). Servant leadership is an attitude of service (Guillen and Gonzalez, 2001), one which concentrates servant leaders on service (Fairholm and Fairholm, 2000). The servant leader gives of ones self in service (Swindoll, 1981) which involves personal involvement and authenticity. Service is giving of oneself and requires generosity which can mean giving of time, energy, care, compassion, and perhaps, even one's belongings.

Servant leaders exhibit service as they support the frontline, discover the uniqueness of each employee, unleash creativity in people, and contribute to the larger good knowing that this is bigger than themselves, and further, actually seek to opportunities to serve others (Aggarwal and Simkins, 2001; Lyerly & Maxey, 2001; Wis, 2002; Smith, 2003; Patterson, 2003). The servant leader is a role model, in behavior and styles, showing others in the organization how to serve, setting the organizational climate (Lytle, Hom, & Mokwa, 1998; Lynn, Lytle, & Bobek, 2000). Melrose (1995) stated that when this type of example is set, service begets service, ultimately permeating the corporate culture.
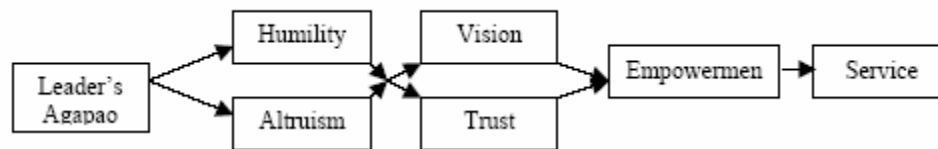

Figure 1. The model of constructs. This model details how the servant leadership constructs work together beginning with agapao love and ending with service.

Further Research

While offering a needed perspective into the theoretical stance of servant leadership, more investigation and research is needed to fully understand the servant leadership phenomena. Concurrent research with Patterson's (2003) work provided some insight into this servant leadership theoretical model as the constructs were assessed for contextual validity and acceptability. For instance, Bryant (2003) evaluated local government leaders, while Nelson (2003) assessed the constructs cross-culturally among Black African leaders in sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, Dillman (2003) assessed the constructs with pastors in Australia, and Dennis (2003) is working on a servant leadership instrument. Future investigation into the theoretical model presented should include more contextual validation as well as research into the follower perspective, such as the research of Winston (2003).

Conclusion

Servant leadership is a viable theory as presented in this discussion; a theory that addresses phenomena--such as altruism towards followers and humility--that are unexplained by other leadership theories, specifically transformational leadership theory. Servant leadership is about the focus leaders have on others, particularly the leader's focus on the followers that he/she leads and serves. The duplicitous role of the servant leader includes the following virtuous constructs: (a) love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, and (g) service.

Perhaps Greenleaf (1977; 2002) put it best when he stated the great leader is servant first and that this is the key to his greatness. As the pursuit of understanding and investigation into servant leadership goes forth we must remember Greenleaf's admonition, "able servants with potential to lead will lead, and where appropriate, they will follow only servant leaders. Not much else counts if this does not happen" (2002, p. 59).

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