

Research Roundtable Presentation: Servant Leadership and Power in Positional-Led Organizations

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This presentation seeks to address the following question: What affect does power have on the actualization of a servant-leadership paradigm within an organization? In reviewing the literature it was discovered that power is a significant component within servant leadership that needs to be researched. From the examined literature, it appears that servant-leadership may best be realized within the context of positionally led organizations when it is carried out from a platform of personal power as opposed to positional power. Positional power, on its own, may not be an optimal platform for the establishment of servant-leadership within an organization, and in many ways, may become a deterrent to its actualization.

Introduction

This presentation seeks to address the affects of power on servant-leadership as a paradigm within positional-led organizations. In many people's minds, positional-leadership is a redundant term, and has been substantiated by a review of the literature. In fact, when most write on the topic of leadership within organizations, leadership implies position. For instance, when a writer acknowledges the leadership of Corporation X, they are not talking about leadership as a function but as a position. However, according to Laub (2004), position does not imply leadership. In organizational life, there is a sense that position equals leadership, as if a position contains all the merit one needs to lead within an organization. The value of a position within an organization is the opportunity it provides the individual position-holder within an organization. From a servant leadership paradigm, a position simply becomes a platform allowing this paradigm, or mindset, to be realized. A paradigm should not

be equated to a leadership theory, but is a mindset in which a particular theory is carried out within an organization. Further research is needed to support what theories of leadership best incorporate a servant-leadership paradigm as a basis of actualization.

Positional-leadership is a reality in most organizations in today's world; from corporate America to independently owned businesses and nonprofit organizations. This reality is not a shift from the historical norm. From the fall of mankind in the Garden, individuals have been placed in positions for the express purpose of leading. What continues to influence those who acquire such positions is three-fold: (1) the expectations of those who grant positions intended for leadership; (2) the expectations of those directly affected, namely the followers; and (3) external influences, i.e., customers, competitors, suppliers, and etc.. The difficulty that exists is transplanting a servant-leadership paradigm into positionally-led organizations, because, in the minds of many positional-leaders, servant-leadership and positional-leadership are mutually exclusive. A bias exists that believes servant-leadership to be weak, indecisive, and incapable of proactive, decisive leadership (Millard, 2004). Sendjaya and Sarros add:

It is important to note that the servant leader's deliberate choice to serve and be a servant should not be associated with any forms of low self-concept or self-image, the same way as choosing to forgive should not be viewed as a sign of weakness. Instead, it would take a leader with an accurate understanding of his or her self-image, moral conviction and emotional stability to make such a choice" (paragraph 33).

In some cases, servant-leadership is thought to be nothing more than a cliché. However, servant-leadership, in the author's opinion, is more than a cliché. It is a leadership paradigm applicable to all levels of organizational life. With its roots in antiquity, servant-leadership principles are experiencing a rebirth in modern organizations, if not in action then at least in motive. In this presentation, the author will provide components of servant-leadership research, its applicability to positional-leadership within organizational structure, and the possible deterrent positional-leadership is to realizing a servant-leadership paradigm within an organization. This presentation begins by researching the definitional parameters of positional-leadership and servant-leadership, to bring clarity to these vast topics.

Positional-Leadership

Defining Leadership

There is a significant amount of research defining leadership. Equal to the number of texts and articles written on the topic of leadership are the definitions to match. Theorists and practitioners, seeking to weigh in or attempting to clear up confusion surrounding this massive topic, have offered scores of definitions. Kouzes and Posner (2002) define leadership as “a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow” (p. 20). Yukl (2002) states that “leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives” (p. 7). Daft (2005) weighs in by stating that “leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (p. 5). Rost notes, “Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real change that reflect their mutual purposes” (p. 102). What are not as readily available are definitions for positional-leadership. This begs the question, “Should positional-leadership be defined differently than the term leadership?”

Defining Positional Leadership

Though this is only implied by most researchers and not stated, positional-leadership is the act of engaging in leadership as a position-holder within an organization. A gap in research is revealed when attempting to find a solid definition for what is understood or implied to be positional-leadership. In fact, most researchers just address the term “leadership,” providing definitions, functions and attributes as the applied action of a leader within an organization without ever defining what is meant by the term *positional-leader*. As noted earlier, many use the term *leader* implying an actual position-holder within an organization. Senge (1990), as cited by Sendjaya and Sarros (2002), states, “In the organizational context, the word ‘leader’ has been mostly ascribed to people who hold management positions and are capable of giving orders to other members of the organization” (paragraph 24). In one instance, Fiedler defined leader as “the individual in the group given the task of directing and coordinating task relevant group activities . . .” (Fiedler, 1967, p. 8). Even Webster’s Dictionary defines leader as a position. It states that a leader is a “guiding or directing head” (Braham et al., 1999, p. 752).

What is often assumed is that individuals who are placed in positions that require leadership are equipped to lead, based on traits, personality or even their charismatic nature. Laub states, “When we

claim that someone is the *leader*, we are trained to think first of the person positionally in charge of others – the CEO, the supervisor, the boss” (Laub, 2004, p. 3). Laub goes on to state that the definition of the term “leader” must be differentiated from the position that a leader holds within an organization. Laub (2004) adds, “We all know of positional leaders who do not lead. It is important then that we maintain the difference between leading and simply holding a role, or office that some would call ‘the leader’” (p. 4). Kouzes and Posner (2002) state:

“It’s a myth that leadership is associated with position. It’s an assumption that leadership starts with a capital ‘L,’ and that when you’re on top you’re automatically a leader. It’s part of a larger hero myth that inhibits us from seizing the initiative. ‘It’s not my job,’ we say, and we wait for someone to ride in and save us” (p. 386).

Laub (2004) suggests that the term “leader” is someone “who sees a vision, takes action toward the vision, and mobilizes others to become partners in pursuing change” (p. 4). This is a shift from a contemporary understanding of what most research suggests a position-holder to be, implied or stated. Laub’s definition can be applied to position-holders or to those who simply want to affect change within an organization. Kouzes and Posner (2002) again add:

“Leadership is not a place, it’s not a gene, and it’s not a secret code that can’t be deciphered by ordinary people. The truth is that leadership is an observable set of skills and abilities that are useful whether one is in the executive suite or on the front line, on Wall Street or Main Street, in any campus, community, or corporation” (p. 386).

Power and Position

What leadership research supports is the need for power-leverage. If an individual within an organization wants to lead, but simply does not have position and/or power to accomplish the task, he or she will fail in their attempts to lead. Position then becomes dependent upon power. Positional-leadership, as understood in contemporary terms, transitions from a leadership base to a power base, with power being the operative vehicle for realizing positional-leadership. Greenberg and Baron (2003) define power as “[t]he potential to influence others successfully” (p. 443). Northouse (2004) states, “People have power when they have the ability to affect others’ beliefs, attitudes, and courses of action” (p. 6).

Often power is understood and realized as a negative force, whether in organizations or in relationships. Karp (1996) notes three perspectives of power: good, evil and neutral. Karp contends that power is really neutral. He adds, “Power isn’t good and it isn’t bad; it simply is, just as electricity isn’t intrinsically good or bad, it just is. It is how it is used that makes a difference” (p. 13). Robbins (1998) adds, “Power refers to a capacity that A has to influence the behavior of B, so that B acts in accordance with A’s wishes” (p. 396). Robbins goes on to state that this particular definition implies potential that does not need to be actualized for its effectiveness to be realized. Though position is not a prerequisite for all forms of power, it provides a working platform in many instances. French and Raven (1959), as cited in Bratton, Grint and Nelson (2005), provide their taxonomy of power as five distinct types. They are: (1) reward power; (2) coercive power; (3) legitimate power; (4) expert power; and (5) referent power (please reference Appendix A).

Power Types

Within this taxonomy, which has been expanded by some researchers, there are two characteristics of power. According to Northouse (2004), these two major categories are positional power and personal power. To better understand this dichotomy of power and the effects of power on positions within organizations, both position power and personal power will be explored.

Positional Power.

Position power is a product of a particular position held within an organization. This may be realized in the form of a CEO, vice-president, or a department supervisor or manager. The individual in this “position” has been given the rights to exert power within the scope of that particular position. This power is limited within the boundaries of this position and the title it bears. Landy and Conte (2004) suggest that “[t]he higher the manager [position] is in the organization, the more power, or authority, he or she tends to have” (p. 449). Greenberg and Baron (2004) divide positional power into four possible components, allowing positional power to be realized within an organization (please reference Appendix B).

The first type of positional power is **legitimate power**. This component of positional power is extended to position-holders “because others recognize and accept their authority” (p. 444). Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy (1999) propose that legitimate power “can be thought of as one’s formal or official authority” (p. 147). The term “legitimate” does not imply that the other components of

positional power are not legitimate. However, legitimate power is restricted to the power leverage an individual has within a particular position and, according to Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy (1999), “[h]olding a position and being a leader are not synonymous, despite the relatively common practice of calling position holders in bureaucracies the leaders” (p. 147). Legitimate power can be illustrated by understanding its limits. For instance, John is the CEO of ACME Lawn and Garden. His positional power allows him to direct his employees to mow the lawn surrounding the county courthouse which his company has been contracted to do. On the other hand, the *legitimate power* acknowledged toward John by his employees, to mow the courthouse lawn, is no longer legitimate when an employee is asked to mow his mother-in-law’s lawn as a personal favor. Legitimate power is limited within the scope of the position.

There is also support for adding legitimate power within the category of personal power, at least in part. Individuals who demonstrate the use of personal power types can be noted as influencing others in a legitimate manner. For this particular presentation, though, legitimate power will be viewed in the context of positional power.

A second type of positional power is **reward power**. Reward power is limited to what a position-holder is empowered to extend to those who are within the scope of his or her power. Rewards can be tangible, such as raises, bonuses, or promotions. Rewards can also be intangible, including praise or verbal acknowledgements. Greenberg and Baron (2003) note, “In both cases, access to these desired outcomes gives power to the individuals who control them” (p. 444). Though reward power may seem to be the simplest way to motivate followers, Bratton, Grint, & Nelson (2005) state that “giving people extra money or equivalent rewards does not necessarily secure control and may be counterproductive” (pp. 125 & 126). Reward power may increase productivity or motivate followers to give extra effort to the organization, but a position-holder must be held accountable by the organization to eliminate the possibility of abuse. Reward power is also limited to the initial positive impact that it delivers to the followers, thus encouraging abuse from the followers who continually seek to gain more. If not closely monitored, reward power can become a deterrent to a positive leader/follower relationship promoting negative outcomes and the negative use of coercive power.

A third type of positional power is **coercive power**. Within an organizational setting, coercive power relies heavily on the legitimacy of the position a person holds. Northouse (2004) states that coercive

power is the manipulation of rewards and punishment to influence followers. “Leaders who use coercion are interested in their own goals and seldom are interested in the wants and needs of subordinates” (p. 7). Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy state that coercive power “is the ability to control others through the fear of punishment or the loss of valued outcomes” (p. 150). Others agree that fear is a common component of coercive power. Position-holders who use coercive power are likely to diminish their leadership potential and are likely to be viewed simply as managers, not as organizational leaders. Robbins (1998) adds, “The coercive power base is defined by French and Raven as being dependent on fear. One reacts to this power out of fear of the negative results that might occur if one failed to comply” (p. 397). This dependence on fear removes the need for skilled leadership on the part of the position-holder and equips him with a power source that forces his subordinates to respond.

The fourth type of positional power is **information power**. According to Greenberg and Baron (2003), information power has become a lesser power due to technology and the availability of information to more people than ever before. In the past, information was reserved for those who held top positions, using information for their benefit and allowing that information to be distributed only on a need-to-know basis, or even in a biased manner. This has been realized in many dictatorships throughout history. When it becomes necessary for a position-holder to disseminate information and for that information to be viewed from a biased perspective, it becomes a weapon. Bratton, Grint, and Nelson (2005) state that “linguistic taxonomies generate the boundaries that encourage people to see things differently” (p. 305).

Positional power, in all of its forms, does not give credence to a position-holder as a leader, much less a servant-leader. This is not to suggest that positional power is never used by a leader, authoritarian, paternalistic, or servant, but it cannot be the crux of his or her leadership credibility. It must be used proportionately in relationship to the situation and then only as the need arises. For instance, Jesus driving the money-changers from the temple is a good example of a servant-leader using positional power in an extreme situation. His positional power, though it is deemed as unofficial by some, was used as a demonstration for his followers as what was right and wrong, not as a distortion of power for personal gain or to elevate himself within the religious community. Christ’s

focus was on his followers and the impact this temple perversion, as displayed by the religious position-holders, might have on his followers.

Personal Power.

The second part of understanding this dichotomy of power is described in the following section of this literature review. Per the previous review, we have come to understand that positional power provides leverage for a position-holder to accomplish whatever he or she sets out to do within an organization, within the boundaries of their authority. Positional power is granted to the position-holder on merits of the position and not necessarily on the leadership merits of the position-holder. However, *personal power* potentially demonstrates leadership merit developed by the position-holder and granted by the followers within an organization.

Personal power is derived and sustained by those who choose to follow. The focus is less on the position-holder's power and more on the granting of power by the followers. In many instances, personal power exists in the absence of position. Personal power provides a realistic platform for melding positional-leadership and servant-leadership. Yukl states, "Research on the use of different forms of power by leaders suggests that effective leaders rely more on personal power than on position power" (Green, 1999, p. 56). Yukl continues to advocate the importance of positional power, as it "interacts in complex ways with personal power to determine a leader's influence on subordinates." Yukl concludes, though, that use of position power is much more limited and that personal power is "clearly the predominant source of influence." Greenberg and Baron (2003) state that personal power is what "one derives because of his or her individual qualities or characteristics" (445). Northouse (2004) adds, "When leaders act in ways that are important to followers, it gives leaders power" (p. 6). Personal power can be actualized by a position-holder in five distinct types (please reference Appendix B).

First, there is **rational persuasion**. Rational persuasion relies heavily on what a leader believes to be important in terms of outcome. This gives leverage to the leader by compelling followers to engage in a particular action or group of actions. For instance, a politician may believe that poverty is a national issue that must be addressed on a local level and may use local illustrations of poverty to engage constituents in the national issue. By persuading his constituents the politician is using rational

persuasion. Hughes, Ginnett & Curphy (1999) state, “Rational persuasion occurs when an agent uses logical arguments or factual evidence to influence others” (p. 156).

A second type of personal power is known as **expert power**. According to Greenberg and Baron (2003), expert power is derived from a person’s advanced skills and abilities. Individuals within an organization recognize this person’s skills and abilities and grant leadership based on their superior knowledge. This leadership is not based on position, but on what the leader has to offer followers based on his or her expertise. Landy and Conte (2004) state that expert power is “the knowledge or expertise that a supervisor has in a special area” (p. 450). Expert power is not confined to those who are position-holders, but also to those who have skill and expertise; thus allowing personal power to be exercised beyond the realm of positional power. Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy (1999) suggest that “a surgeon may wield considerable influence in a hospital because others depend on her knowledge, skill, and judgment, even though she may not have any formal authority over them” (p. 145). With or without a position of authority, this surgeon is able to influence others based on her knowledge and skills. If she is a position-holder within the organization that she serves, her expert power fortifies the position that she holds.

A third type of personal power is **referent power**. French and Raven (1959) state that referent power is “secured through followers’ identifying with the leader and wanting to gain his or her approval” (Bratton, Grint, & Nelson, 2005, p. 129). According to Robbins (1998), “Its base is identification with a person who has desirable resources or personal traits. If I admire and identify with you, you can exercise power over me because I want to please you” (p. 400). Referent power is dependent on what the follower perceives about a leader, though this can be dangerous if the leader is charismatic and utilizes this power for selfish gain.

Referent power brings attention to a fourth type of personal power: **charisma**. Charisma has been identified by researchers as a power type within leadership. Though French and Raven (1959) would likely leave this concept within the realm of referent power, charisma has everything to do with a leader’s personal dynamic and little to do with a follower, except for the decision to follow based on the charisma of the leader. Greenberg and Baron (2003) state that charisma is “an attitude of enthusiasm and optimism that is contagious; an aura of leadership” (p. 446). A charismatic leader inspires followers based on enthusiastic speech and/or actions, prompting followers’ attraction and

subsequent engagement as a follower. History is full of illustrations reminding readers of charismatic leaders who have abused this type of power, leading people to commit atrocities typically viewed as unthinkable. From a positive perspective, though, charismatic leadership can prompt followers to engage in actions that benefit others and organizations that might otherwise not be accomplished.

Another power type that has been added by some researchers is **credibility**. According to Horai and Tedeschi (1969), as cited by the research compiled by Aguinis, Simonson, and Pierce (1998), credibility increases the ability of a power source to influence others. Additionally, Nesler et. al. (1993), again cited by Aguinis, Simonson, and Pierce (1998), “gathered additional support for credibility as a power base: Managers with high credibility were perceived as more powerful (i.e., having referent expert, legitimate and reward power) than managers with low credibility” (paragraph 4).

Shifting the Leadership Mandate

A mandate for shifting from relying on positional power as a leadership platform to a personal power leadership platform that focuses on the needs of the follower can be traced back to the words of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 20:25&26, Jesus states, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it [positions] over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...” (NIV). Jesus was not suggesting that positions are evil, wrong or that they should be abolished but that individuals should not use their positions to fulfill their selfish, humanistic desires with little regard for the needs of others or the organizations they serve. “Not so with you” is a mandate by Christ to utilize positions as leadership posts to serve those who follow. As noted previously, personal power provides a realistic platform for melding positional-leadership and servant-leadership. In order to understand this melding possibility, there must first be an attempt to define the somewhat ambiguous topic of servant leadership.

Servant-Leadership

Defining Servant-Leadership

Servant-leadership has been defined by individuals from many walks of life, not just from a spiritual perspective, though it possesses many spiritual attributes. Spears (1998), Executive Director of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, identifies ten critical characteristics of servant leadership from the writings of Robert K. Greenleaf. The characteristics are (1) listening, (2) empathy, (3) healing, (4) awareness, (5) persuasion, (6) conceptualization, (7) foresight, (8) stewardship, (9) commitment,

and (10) building community. Laub (1999) provides definitional parameters to convey his understanding of servant leadership. He states:

Servant leadership is an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. Servant leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization and those served by the organization (p. 83).

As we assess these components, it becomes evident that an organizational mandate for these components is difficult and relies heavily on personal power, an organizational mindset, and organizational culture. If position-holders do not individually adopt a servant mindset, utilizing personal power to integrate servanthood into organizational culture, servant-leadership will not survive organizationally, or at best, it will simply be marginalized.

Merging a Servant-Leadership Paradigm into Positional-Leadership

A difficulty with servant-leadership implementation is its actualization within an organization. This may then beg the question: “How can servant-leadership be mandated as a style within an organization?” Two problems exist with this question. First, servant leadership will likely be unsuccessful as a mandate for leadership, due to the varying motivations of leaders. In fact, it is this author’s belief that servant-leadership cannot be mandated, regardless of the organizational position of an individual. By virtue of a mandate, it potentially loses its servant nature. Second, servant leadership is not a style; it is a mindset. Millard (2004) states, “True servant-leadership is not a style that leaders choose to adopt only when they think it is appropriate. It is rather a mindset—a paradigm—that impacts every type of leadership style a leader may choose to adopt” (pp. 2-3).

Make no mistake; this author does not intend to join the ranks of nay-sayers who insist that servant-leadership is organizationally impossible. Levering and Moskowitz (2000) “contend that servant leadership has been practiced and advocated in some of the best companies to work for in America, on the basis of the Fortune survey” (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002, paragraph 42). They state what they believe to be six criteria that identify these companies: (1) openness and fairness; (2) camaraderie/friendliness; (3) opportunities; (4) pride in work and company; (5) pay/benefits; and (6) security.

Conclusion

The question is simply this: “What affect does power have on the actualization of a servant-leadership paradigm within an organization?” From the examined literature, it appears that servant-leadership can be realized within the context of positionally led organizations when it is carried out from a platform of personal power as opposed to positional power. Positional power may not be an optimal platform for the establishment of servant-leadership within an organization, and in many ways, may be a deterrent to its actualization. However, this is not to suggest that all who utilize personal power are servant leaders. Personal power, utilized by a position-holder within an organization, simply becomes an optimal platform for actualizing servant-leadership. In some respects, positions, like power, are a neutral value, neither positive nor negative. It simply becomes a vehicle of opportunity for a servant-leader. This author contends, along with Millard (2004), that servant-leadership is not simply a style, an action or set of actions that change as the needs of the organization change. Servant leadership is a mindset, a paradigm, a determination of the leader to focus on the needs of the follower and the organization. What must be realized, within the context of an organization, is that in order for servant-leadership to be organizationally effective, personal power should be considered as an optimal source for the development of a servant culture within an organization.

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Appendix A

French and Raven’s Taxonomy of Power



<u>Power Type</u>	<u>Source of Compliance</u>
Reward Power:	Compliance is secured by providing rewards that followers want.
Coercive Power:	Compliance is secured by using punishments that followers want to avoid.
Legitimate Power:	Compliance is secured through followers’ belief that requests are rational and that the leader’s position is legitimate.
Expert Power:	Compliance is secured through followers’ belief that the leader has sufficient expertise to make rational requests.
Referent Power:	Compliance is secured through followers’ identifying with the leader and wanting to gain his or her approval.

Source: French, J., and Raven, B.H. (1959). “The Bases of Social Power.” In D. Cartwright (ed.), *Studies of Social Power*. Ann Arbor: MI: Institute for Social Research.

Appendix B

