

## The Implication of Servant Leadership on Work Performance

**Aastha Kumar**

Assistant Professor

Delhi School of Professional Studies and Research

### **Abstract**

The ideology of servant leadership existed eons ago. Servant leadership is a distinctive style of leadership ideology which emphasizes the importance of group interest and subordination of individual interest. It lays down the significance of basic human values in attainment of organizational goals and improvement of subordinates' performance. In this paper, servant leadership attributed to qualities like listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualizing, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth, and community building (Spears, 2004). Servant leadership principles not only increase job satisfaction, but also improve organizational productivity and promote a more conducive work environment and organizational culture. The same has been described in the paper.

### **Introduction**

Leadership forms an integral part of the organization management because it is leadership that lays the foundation of and conveys to all employees the overarching direction of the organization (Gupta, McDaniel & Herath, 2005). Amongst a myriad of trait and behavioral theories, none explain the variety and forms of leadership in entirety. At its very core, leadership can be defined as the relationship between a person who influences the behavior or actions of other people and those who are so influenced (Mullins, 1996). Mullins is of the opinion that leadership is a perpetual and dynamic process that must be altered to suit a particular management philosophy as well as the widely different work situations that a leader is faced with. Unlike scientific theories, leadership theories and styles cannot be applied to routine business scenarios as it is and therefore, effective leadership is characterized by a multiplicity of traits such as dynamism, equanimity, conscientiousness, foresight et al. The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) (2009) defines leadership as "how leaders develop and facilitate the achievement of the mission and vision, develop values required for long-term success and implement these via appropriate actions and behaviors, and are personally involved in ensuring that the organization's management system is developed and implemented."

The term Servant leadership was initially coined in the 1970s by Robert K. Greenleaf in an essay titled 'The Servant as leader'. Greenleaf proposed that the servant-leader is one who is a servant first. In his essay he states, "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead." The basic distinction being, the willingness to priorities the needs of the subordinates before one's own needs. It is rightly observed by Russell and Stone (2002), that a servant leader understands that the power vested in him by way of his position has only one legitimate use i.e. service. Page and Wong (2000) define servant leadership as that style of leadership which centers on the ideology of development of subordinates for the overall success of the organization. Another prominent definition in the

servant leadership literature defines servant leadership as the act of refraining from using power, influence and position to fulfill one's own needs and instead gravitating to a position where these instruments are used to empower, enable and encourage those who are within one's circle of influence (Rude, 2003 in Nwogu, 2004, p.2).

Servant-leadership upholds a people-oriented approach to analysis and decision making as a tool of strengthening institutions and improving society. It also advocates the use of persuasion and team consensus, over the traditional top-down form of leadership. It may also be described as turning the hierarchical pyramid upside down. Servant-leadership promotes that the growth and development of the followers is a prerequisite for the success of a leader as well as attainment of organizational goals.

#### Characteristics of the Servant-Leader

The basic attributes of a servant-leader have been identified as follows:

1. Listening: Listening is an art that requires attention over talent, spirit over ego and others over self. The ideology of servant leadership has been built on the premise of subordination of individual goals over group interest. The traditional view of leadership laid a lot of emphasis on the importance of communication skills and the ability to exact performance from the subordinates. While these are also important skills for the servant-leader, they need to be reiterated by a deep commitment to listening intently to others. The primary aim of the servant-leader is to identify the will of the followers and work in unison to reconcile their aspirations with the organizational goals. Listening however is not merely confined to receptiveness towards followers but it also encompasses the ability of an individual to get in touch with one's own inner voice and seeking to understand what one's body, spirit, and mind are communicating. Listening, coupled with regular periods of contemplation is essential to the growth of the servant-leader.

2. Empathy: Sympathy is easy. You have sympathy for starving children swatting at flies on the late night commercials. Sympathy is easy because it comes from a position of power. Empathy is getting down on your knees and looking someone else in the eye, and realizing that you could be them, and that all that separates you is luck. Empathy is one of the distinctive attributes possessed by a servant-leader. It is of utmost importance that people must be accepted for what they are. Even if a leader does not accept certain aspects of the followers' personality or behavior, he or she must not reject them as people. Empathetic listening is what makes a servant-leader stand out from among the crowd.

3. Healing: In *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf writes: "There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share." The power to heal is one of the greatest strengths of the servant-leader. A leader comes in close contact with a variety of unique people from diverse backgrounds and histories. Many people have shattered spirits due to a multitude of life situations and emotional hurts. It is a moral obligation of a true leader to not just strive to understand his followers' perspective but also make concerted efforts put them on the road to recovery. Therefore, the ability to heal oneself as well as others is one of the greatest strengths of a servant-leader.

4. Awareness: The first step to complete awareness is mindfulness, i.e. awareness of self. A commitment to creating total awareness is a daunting task because of the ambiguity and uncertainty of the results. Awareness enables a leader to tackle most situations from a more integrated and holistic approach. The concept of awareness in the theory of servant-leadership trickles down its very foundation wherein it includes awareness of the organization's environment, awareness of all the aspects of the followers' personality as well as total self awareness. As Greenleaf observed: "Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity."

5. Persuasion: The triumph of persuasion over force is the sign of a civilized society. Another peculiar attribute of a servant-leader is the ability to exact performance not by coercion but by persuasion. Since time immemorial, it has been observed that referent power has proved to be more effective than legitimate or coercive power. The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. This is what distinguishes the servant-leadership model from the conventional authoritarian model. Building consensus within the group builds up camaraderie and cordial relations among all.

6. Conceptualization: The traditional manager is expected to adopt a myopic view focusing solely on the short term routine tasks and objectives. A clear demarcation is drawn between the roles of a manager and that of the top management namely the board of trustees and directors. The responsibilities are bifurcated into watertight compartments wherein the top management is required to foster a conceptual orientation and the staff members are called upon to manage the operational aspect of work. Servant-leaders are the ones who seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day focused approach. Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to "dream great dreams." The ability to look at a problem (or an organization) from a conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities. The manager who wishes to also be a servant-leader must stretch his or her thinking to encompass broader based conceptual thinking. It is imperative for a servant leader to inculcate a visionary approach as well as manage the ground level tasks in a synchronized fashion.

7. Foresight: The ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation is hard to define, but easy to identify. The ability to comprehend future trends enables the servant-leader to perfectly align the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the probable consequence of a decision for the future. Foresight is intricately associated with the intuitive power of the mind. As such, one can conjecture that foresight is the one servant-leader characteristic with which one may be born. All other characteristics can be acquired with practice and perseverance. Intuition and foresight is rather instinctive and must be honed in order to utilize it to the maximum.

8. Stewardship: Peter Block (author of *Stewardship and The Empowered Manager*) has defined stewardship as "holding something in trust for another." Robert Greenleaf's view of all institutions was one in which CEOs, staffs, and trustees all played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society. Servant-leadership, like stewardship, assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others. It also emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion rather than control.

9. Commitment to the growth of people: Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within his or her institution. The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything within his or her power to nurture the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of employees. In practice, this can include (but is not limited to) concrete actions such as making available funds for personal and professional development, taking a personal interest in the ideas and suggestions from everyone, encouraging worker involvement in decision making, and actively assisting laid-off workers to find other employment.

10. Building community: The servant-leader senses that much has been lost in recent human history as a result of the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shaper of human lives. This awareness causes the servant-leader to seek to identify some means for building community among those who work within a given institution. Servant-leadership suggests that true community can be created among those who work in businesses and other institutions. Greenleaf said: “All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his own unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group.”

## Servant leadership and Work Performance



### Servant Leadership and Job Satisfaction

The term ‘job satisfaction’ may be defined as the level of contentment achieved through the job. It is studied by an employee’s emotional reaction towards their work and the organizational

environment based on the evaluation of the actual results against their expectations (Phillips & Gully, 2012). Stringer (2006) found empirical evidence for the assumption that cordial supervisor-employee relationships are imperative for both intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction. Mohammad, Al-Zeaud, & Batayneney (2011) also concluded that there exists a direct link between leadership behavior and the level of satisfaction amongst followers. The intrinsic aspect of job satisfaction is determined on the basis of an individual's attitude and perception towards the work environment and includes factors such as acknowledgement, development, and responsibility. The extrinsic components are comprised of external job related variables such as remuneration, supervision, and working conditions, (Negussie & Demissie, 2013).

To analyze occupational fulfillment; Mayer, Bardes, Piccolo (2008), conducted a survey study linking follower need and job satisfaction through measuring organizational justice. The theoretical model linked servant leadership to justice perceptions, which in turn related to need satisfaction, and ultimately eventuated into job satisfaction. To support the model, previous theoretical and empirical work linking servant leadership to needs satisfactions and justice perceptions were extracted (Greenleaf, 1991). Various empirical findings support theoretical work which suggests leaders play a pivotal role in satisfying need, a precursor to job satisfaction. The implications specify that servant leaders tend to satisfy follower needs in the work setting. An identified mechanism a leader can utilize to improve upon job satisfaction is persuasion. Servant leaders have a better understanding of the attitudinal and motivational demands that followers need. Leaders who address unmet psychological needs engineer positive emotions. Transcending group perceptions of organizational justice leads to increased productivity (Maxwell, 1998). Consequently, there is a trend in servant leadership organizations to train supervisors with learning and implementing effective justice principles (Skarkicki & Latham, 1996). Human resource systems function by utilizing human capital, establishing an organizational mission to employ servant-type behavior characteristics in future leaders solidifies the core values of servant leadership based institutions (Delery & Doty, 1996). Corporations that have adopted servant-leadership as their foundation and philosophy include; Starbucks, Men's Warehouse, Toro Company, Synovus Financial Corporation and the most financially stable airline corporation in the country, Southwest Airlines. TDI Industries, a heating and plumbing based operation out of Dallas Texas, is the pioneer institution of servant leadership. TDI is first corporate practitioner and continually ranks in Fortune magazine's Top 100 companies to work for in America (Greenleaf, 1991).

Saari and Judge (2004) found evidence that job satisfaction has a direct bearing on employee performance which in turn plays a crucial role in the long term success of an enterprise. Effective management of all factors that influence employee behavior and job satisfaction creates a positive impact on their discretionary abilities and performance levels (Phillips & Gully, 2012).

### Servant Leadership and Motivation

Robert Greenleaf's seminal work on servant leadership has been refined since 1977, but the essence of the theory remains. A servant leader cultivates trust in his employees through ethical use of power. A servant leader trains his replacement. Leaders will inspire, through their

unflagging devotion to the people who perform the greater mission, and subordinates to lead in like manner. The subordinates of a servant leader will become increasingly free, wise and autonomous (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf (1977) meanwhile articulated servant leadership in which individuals would not necessarily be required to hold office or a particular leadership position. Rather, by encouraging the cultivation of trust and the ethical use of power, the servant leader views the responsibility of service to the organization as first and then leadership as a means of expanding the organization's capacity to fulfill its core mission and its obligations to its stakeholders. The test of leadership, according to Greenleaf, therefore is to see if followers became "healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" (p. 35). Northouse (2004) defined servant leadership with "a strong altruistic ethical overtone which emphasizes leaders being attentive to the concerns of their followers; they should take care of them and nurture them and in return they will take care of the leaders." Here the organization holds the leader fully responsible for the follower's outcomes. In fact, the way an individual becomes a leader is by first assuming the role of a servant (Northouse). In the servant leadership style, the authority shifts to those who are being led so that the dynamics of power and control, so important to traditional leadership styles, become secondary to the need to strengthen relationships of trust within the organizational hierarchy (Perry & Mankin, 2007). Value and trust in leadership is described similarly by the military and by Greenleaf (1977) and Northouse (2004), with an emphasis on the mutually complementary effects of community support and individual and leadership strength.

Deci and Ryan (1985) define autonomy orientation as the degree to which a person is predisposed toward an environment where intrinsic motivation is valued, the task is optimally challenging and provides support in the form of feedback. Autonomy is a state highly correlated to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic motivation is a desirable end state in an employee. An intrinsically motivated employee's locus of causality is not external to that person; they will work harder because they want to, not because they are being controlled (Burton, Lydon, D'Alessandro, & Koestner, 2006; Cameron, Pierce, Banko, & Gear, 2005; Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Deci, 1972; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Locus of causality refers to the perceived source of a behavior, attitude or control. For example, when an individual is offered a reward for performing to a specific standard, that individual will begin to perform the task in order to receive the reward, not because of any native interest. The shift in the locus of causality from an internal one (i.e. I love my job and I'm going to perform it to the best of my ability) to an external one (i.e. I want to get paid for building x-number of widgets), can be detrimental to motivation and an employee's sense of self-worth (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989). Payment for achieving a standard is one example of a contingent reward. Contingent rewards are tangible rewards offered for accomplishing a specific task or meeting a specific goal. When contingent rewards are given over a period of time, the employee will come to feel as if they are performing that task in order to receive a reward or the approval of the organization or individual offering them. That change over time is a shift in the locus of causality. Non-contingent rewards, like verbal praise should be offered to employees (Cameron, Pierce, Banko, & Gear, 2005; Deci, 1972). Interestingly enough, research has shown that verbal praise often has greater positive

impact compared to contingent extrinsic rewards (Deci, 1972). When praise is offered in an autonomy supporting environment, intrinsic motivation is increased. Creating an autonomy supporting environment is a social-dialectical process, one that involves conversation between superior and subordinate. The servant leader embraces the values of the organization and encourages others to do so by example. Successful assimilation of values requires an internal process of self-determination which is inhibited when an environment is controlling (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The process may be an internal one, but developing intrinsic motivation and working toward the mindset of a servant leader requires autonomy. Employees must have the freedom to pursue their intrinsic development aided by an autonomy supporting work environment. Squadron Officer's School is the Company Grade Officer's second-level of professional military education. Course 20, Squadron Officer School's correspondence curriculum explains that motivation is complex and requires that a leader understand and match the requirements of their subordinates, including needs, interests, values, attitudes, incentives, aspiration and fear of failure (Squadron Officer School, 2007).

A less complex model should be applied to motivation; that of self-determination. An individual will become intrinsically motivated naturally in accordance with the self determination continuum. Individuals move throughout their lives in a consistent approach to self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Choice plays a crucial role in self-determination. Where a person has the ability to choose and high intrinsic motivation, higher achievement is likely (Ewing, 2011). By creating an autonomy-supporting environment in the workplace, employees will be more likely to develop the type of intrinsic motivation necessary to become self-motivated servant leaders in their own time. Servant leaders embrace the mission of the organization and realize that through work and sacrifice, they will grow employees who are like-minded. It is important to remember that leadership is not a starring role (Vadell, 2010). A leader takes all of the blame and none of the credit. A leader assimilates the goals of the company and work for the betterment of their subordinates so that they may live out their potential in a self-deterministic manner.

Performance level and employee motivation too are closely interlinked as a motivated and qualified workforce is essential for any company that wants to increase productivity and customer satisfaction (Ovidiu-Iliuta Dobre, 2013). The challenge for any leader is to find the means to create and sustain employee motivation. On one hand, managers should focus on reducing job dissatisfaction (working conditions, salary, supervision, relationship with colleagues), while on the other hand should use motivating factors such as achievement, recognition, responsibility and the work itself. Employee participation and empowerment do not only enhance efficiency, growth and innovation but they also increase employee motivation and trust in the organization. If employees feel appreciated for their work and are involved in decision-making, their enhanced enthusiasm and motivation will lead to better productivity and loyalty.

#### Servant Leadership and Employee Commitment

Employees will be more committed to supervisors that exhibit higher levels of servant leadership behaviors than supervisors that exhibit lesser levels of servant leadership behaviors. Further theoretical reasoning for this hypothesis will now be presented. Yukl (2010) described the

landmark organizational studies conducted by the University of Michigan in the early 1950s to have found the relations-oriented behaviors of leaders, such as helping to develop subordinates and further their careers, as highly effective in leading groups to improved levels of production. Yukl (2010) likewise referenced the landmark studies conducted by Ohio State University in the 1950s as showing a positive correlation between a supervisor's level of consideration of employees and employee turnover rate. In other words, supervisors that exhibited higher levels of consideration of employees to a certain critical point retained more of their employees; thus, a lower voluntary turnover rate existed among the followers of said supervisors. Winston (2004) theoretically proposed, building upon the work of Patterson (2003), that a leader's foundational concern for employees that is manifest in servant leadership relational behaviors towards employees will cause and inspire employee concern for and commitment back to the leader.

Liden et al. (2008) explained from the literature that a servant leader develops long-term relationship with employees, and the relationship literature has shown that the behaviors a relational leader (such as a servant leader) exhibit results in employees replicating the behaviors of the leader. Thus, since the focus of the servant leader is to serve and develop followers, which requires a level commitment to the follower, similar service and commitment is reciprocated back to the leader. Liden et al. (2008) empirically found a correlation between servant leadership behaviors and employee organizational commitment. Based upon the empirical findings and theoretical premises from the literature, this study expects to find that a higher employee commitment to the supervisor (similar to Winston's (2004) theoretical proposal) to be inspired by and positively connected to the initiating relational behaviors of a servant leader towards followers.

Lastly, the Ohio State and University of Michigan studies referenced above found that a leader's relational behaviors and task-oriented behaviors are behaviors that make leaders. This study measured supervisor task-oriented behaviors as part of the control variables and analyzed how they relate to employee commitment to the supervisor in comparison and contrast with the effects of the relational-oriented behaviors of servant leadership on employee commitment to the supervisor. Servant leadership, which penetrates the human higher-order need for relationship beyond task-oriented engagement with supervisors, is expected to be shown to result in a higher and more positive effect on employee commitment to the supervisor than simply engaging employees in a task-oriented manner.

Employee Commitment plays a crucial role in the level of performance within an organization. Today it has become necessary for every organization to have full level of its employee commitment in order to have outstanding performance on long term basis. Higher level of employee commitment in the organization for individual projects or to the business is assumed as a major reason for better organizational performance that leads to organizational success. Richard Steers (1977) found that more committed employees wish to terminate from the organization at minimum level. There will be higher intention of these employees, who are committed to their organization, to remain in the organization and they work hard in performing their tasks that will increase their positive attitude towards the organization and that thing will ultimately increase the productivity of the organization leading to higher organizational



performance. Jeffrey Arthur (1994) concluded that organizational performance will be enhanced by higher level of employee commitment as productivity of the organization is ultimately increased with the help of organizational commitment. Green, Felsted, Mayhew, and Pack (2000) had found that employee commitment decrease the probability of employees' tendency of leaving the job. Effective organizational commitment is always a result of the core behavior of the major employees along with their behavioral factors like turnover intention (Addae et al., 2006).

## **Conclusion**

With the advent of twenty-first century, traditional styles of leadership are slowly replaced with a studier model – which is based on teamwork, community building, growth, participative decision making; ethical and nurturing behavior. Servant leadership is one such new, promising model. It is described as a new paradigm that is appreciated for its holistic approach to individual worker, which meets follower's economic as well as spiritual needs. Thus, Greenleaf's theory propounded in 1960's and 1970's is making new landmarks in journey of leadership. Through its emphasis on teamwork, employee empowerment and flatter organizational structures it is an *ideal* fit. This truly enlightened and emerging approach to leadership and service is addressed as 'Servant Leadership.' It can therefore be concluded that this style of leadership has prove D to be highly effective in enhancement of work performance by improving factors like job satisfaction, employee motivation and employee commitment within an organization.