

The Historical and Philosophical Influences on Greenleaf's Concept of Servant Leadership: Setting the Stage for Theory Building

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Servant leadership has become a popular topic in both the secular and scholarly literature, as organizations increasingly demand both ethical and authentic leaders. Yet we know little about what informs or directs a person to become a servant leader or why someone would engage in servant leadership. This paper offers a philosophical framework that informs and directs the act of servant leadership, the first step in the applied theory-building journey.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Philosophy, Worldviews

Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals are in an era when ethics, morals, and spirituality in the workplace are valuable assets to leadership. Servant leadership has the potential to offer organizations leadership approach grounded in values, ethics, morals, and empowerment of others. This potential has resulted in interest by scholars and practitioners on its specific application within the organization.

Effective leadership is relational and interpersonal. Ultimately, the quality of the relationship between leader and follower determines the quality of the leadership. "Two important aspects of leadership remain constant: leadership is a relational phenomenon that occurs between people, and the fundamental goal of leadership is to remain as effective as possible" (Ferch & Mitchell, 2001, p. 81). The core beliefs of HRD are grounded in the reality that organizations are made up of individuals to establish and achieve goals, and leadership, which occurs within these organizations, are maximized through HRD processes (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Consequently, leadership development is an integral part of what the HRD professional does.

One leadership philosophy increasingly interpreted and referred to in the literature has been that of Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). The servant leadership literature claims that a leader who is:

1. grounded in values (Behr, 1998; Berry, 1999; Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Patterson, 2003),
2. manages by values (Blanchard & O'Connor, 1997; Covey, 1991)
3. and vision (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Farling et.al, 1998; Patterson, 2003; Senge, 1995; Vaill, 1998)

will enhance economic performance (Covey, 1989; Heskett, Sasser, & Hart, 1990; Newsom, 2000). The outcome of these various conceptual interpretations has resulted in different trajectories of meaning, application, and claims as to what servant leadership can do for organizations. Clarifying what kind of thinking informs or directs the act of servant leadership could better inform practitioners and establish the foundation for theory building research (Ruona & Lynham, 2004; Swanson & Holton, 2001; Torraco, 1997).

Theoretical Framework

This paper seeks to advance the understanding of servant leadership in the scholarly literature by making explicit the philosophical framework that informs this concept. Illumination will provide a foundation for theory building research. Three scholars provide the template for this endeavor. First, an integrative literature review exposes historical and conceptual influences on the philosophical components of servant leadership (Torraco, 2005). A literature review of all published work on servant leadership from scholarly journals and dissertations was conducted through The University of Minnesota library website using One Search, Academic Search Premier, and Business Source Premier. Keywords for the searches included servant leadership, servant leadership philosophy; servant leadership and theory; servant leadership and Greenleaf. An etymological study of servant leader, servant leadership and all the writings and reflections of Robert Greenleaf are studied. This study seeks to answer two questions. First, what worldview or paradigm would best align with this concept and second, what is Greenleaf's philosophical framework for servant leadership.

Philosophical concepts are not derived in a vacuum (Senge, 1990). Revealing a philosophy is a twofold task, namely to expose the philosopher's system and to explain how the historical context contributes to this system (Catana, 2005, p. 78). A philosophical framework as proposed by Ruona and Lynham, (2004) makes explicit

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the nature of being, values, beliefs and assumptions that inform the act of servant leadership. The personal nature and historical timing of Greenleaf's writings reflect a philosophical system and posit servant leadership as the nature of ones being (ontology). These philosophical principles mold and inform the act of servant leadership. Ultimately, the findings provide foundation for future theory building (Lynham, 2002). This paper provides an overview of servant leadership, explores the philosophical divisions within the literature, and proposes a philosophical framework that best informs and explains servant leadership. Implications for HRD and future research are explored.

An Overview of Servant Leadership

Servant Leader Defined.

Robert Greenleaf used the term servant leader in the essay he wrote and sent to fellow managers in 1966. This first essay was the deduction of Greenleaf's personal reflection, experience and observation concerning the current state of leadership in organizations, and the reading of a metaphorical story written by Hermann Hesse. *A Journey to the East* tells the story of a group of pilgrims who are on a journey to discover the ultimate eastern order. The pilgrims undergo many trials and struggles but a loyal servant named Leo sustains them. Leo eventually leaves the journey, which results in the rising of various self-proclaimed leaders from among the pilgrims. Although the mission to discover the order ultimately fails, one pilgrim reunites with the faithful servant Leo and discovers that Leo was the actual leader of the eastern order that they sought (Hesse, 1956). Greenleaf concluded that the nature of a true leader is the willingness to be first and primarily a servant to others and it is this very desire to serve others that makes one a great leader (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13). Yet Greenleaf failed to define servant leader.

The term servant is defined as "one who is under obligation to work for the benefit of a superior and to obey his or her commands" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1817, p. 1643). The original term servant leader often is accredited to Christianity and the teachings of Jesus. In the Biblical text, Jesus gives instruction on the qualities of a leader, the role of the leader and the issue of power or (authority) of a leader (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; The New International Version Bible, 1986). Thus, a servant leader *is a person who has an innate desire to lead by serving, serves to align with own beliefs, and strives to meet the highest priorities of others* (Farling, Stone & Winston, 1998; Greenleaf, 1977, p 13; Russell & Stone, 2002; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Spears, 1995).

Servant Leadership Defined.

The concept of servant leadership was defined by Greenleaf (1977) through example, and grounded in his understanding of philosophy and practice. Greenleaf's initial premise was as follows:

1. The leader is a servant first. It begins with the natural feeling of wanting to serve first.
2. The servant first makes sure that the highest priority needs of others are being met.
3. Success is when those who are served become healthier, freer, more autonomous, and wiser and as a result become servants themselves.
4. A servant can only become a leader if a leader remains a servant. (p.13)

Core constructs of servant leadership include an innate value and desire to serve, willingness to act on the desire to serve, and trust from those led. Foresight of the leader as well as the ability to act constructively on that knowledge when given a chance to act is derived from their ethics and is a foundational component (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 26). The focus is not the act of serving but rather the process in serving.

Often the literature will use the term transformational leadership, transactional leadership and servant leadership synonymously, but the focus and intent of these leadership styles are quite different and warrant clarification. According to Burns (1978), Transformational leadership is the process when the leader and follower both act to improve each other's lives. Specifically, these leaders focus on the higher-level needs of others such as esteem, self-fulfillment and self-actualization. Leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are considered transformational leaders because of their ability to transform their followers through inspiration and servant modeling. Although transformational leadership aligns with the same philosophical foundation of servant leadership, the focus of the serving is to the organization rather than the individual (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Transactional leadership may appear to share similar characteristics to servant leadership however a distinct feature is that the leader's actions may or may not benefit the follower (Burns, 1978), and may even be associated with harmful gain as seen in Adolf Hitler (Whetstone, 2002). In addition, transformational and transactional leadership approaches focus on the personal growth of the leader or organization as primary and the follower as secondary (Yukl, 2002) whereas the focus of servant leadership is on the individual being led (Greenleaf, 1996). Servant leadership is thus *the act in which a leader engages with a follower through the desire and process of serving, in such a way that the leader and follower raise one another to a higher level of morality and motivation.* The concept and practice of

servant leadership is supported in the leadership literature but has failed to answer the call for empirical theory building research (Farling, Stone & Winston, 1998; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Spears, 1995; Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2004). The next section of this paper will explore the rationale for a philosophical system in theory building and discuss Greenleaf's philosophy of servant leadership.

Influences on the Philosophy of Servant Leadership

The Philosophical System

Why would someone engage in servant leadership? What is or is not servant leadership? Since philosophy is a system in which the ontology, epistemology and axiology informs and impacts one's view of the world (Ruona & Lynham, 2004, p. 152) the answer to this question arguably is grounded in the philosophical system of servant leadership. What is or is not servant leadership is found by surfacing and clarifying key assumptions of its ontology (Ruona & Lynham, 2004, p. 161) and the resultant clarification aids future discussion.

There is sharp contrast as to how one thinks something happens (philosophy) and how something actually happens (theory). Yet, philosophy and theory are not interchangeable or assumed similar (Moser, Mulder, & Trout, 1998). Since HRD is informed by system theory, the system approach to philosophical development is logical as it assumes that each branch of philosophy-ontology (the nature of man), epistemology (what we know) and axiology (how we act/do), is separate yet interdependent, influencing and informing the others. Clarification is imperative for theory building research to ensue since philosophy and theories are interwoven (Ruona & Lynham, 2004).

Since leadership is a collective, relational activity (Fairholm & Fairholm, 2000; Ferch & Mitchell, 2001; Bass, 1990) it is argued therefore that the philosophy of servant leadership is informed by a philosophical system, with distinct ontological aim, ideals, and actions as a result of this alignment. An extensive review of the literature exposed three separate inclinations within the servant leadership literature. The first inclination is to avoid discussion of a philosophical system that informs or directs servant leadership. The second inclination is to alter or fragment the meaning of servant leadership by imposing an ontological view. Finally, there is an inclination to expose a partial philosophical framework that falls short of being comprehensive, logical, and inclusive of the historical components and personal reflections of Greenleaf.

Since knowledge is socially constructed (Gregeson, 1978), we can expose the historical issues which influenced Greenleaf. Three historical themes offer insight into the Greenleaf's observations and resultant essays - the movement in industry from collectivism toward empirical and pragmatic efficiency; the parallel debate at that time on the purpose of vocational education; and the social movement of humanism, individualism and moral fragmentation (Greenleaf, 1977; Lazerson & Grubb, 1974). Since the focus of the literature review for this phase is exposure of a philosophical system, specific discussion here on the components or models of servant leadership are not within the scope of this paper.

Several scholarly contributions to the discussion of servant leadership focus on identifying the behavioral or cognitive components of a servant leader apart from an explicit philosophical framework (Farling, Russell & Stone, 2002; Spears, 1995; Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2004; Stone & Winston, 1998). Spears (1995) extracted his list of servant leader characteristics from the writings and working relationship with Greenleaf. Additionally a model of servant leadership introduced by Farling, Stone and Winston (1998) and later refined by Russell and Stone (2002) identify and operationalize constructs of the servant leader. There has been an extensive amount of work done to address concerns regarding charismatic traits (Whetstone, 2002) and clarify the nature and intent of servant leadership and transformational leadership (Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2004; Patterson, 2003). These models fail to make explicit a philosophical framework that would explain why one would engage in this relational state. Consequently, the literature has potentially lent itself to alternative interpretations or fragmented application of specific servant leadership concepts.

Acting on partial or alternative forms of these concepts without an explicit core philosophy creates problems and raises concern about the nature and intent of servant leadership (Whetstone, 2002). Our philosophy becomes who we are and thus informs, impacts, and influence what we know, and think and how we act (Ruona & Lynham, 2004). Servant leadership asserted by organizations that do not embrace a philosophical system alignment can create skeptics and foster manipulation. For example, the largest retail giant in the World contends it has incorporated servant leadership by *teaching* three basic beliefs to each new employee: to respect the individual, to serve their customers, and to strive for excellence. Servant leadership is equated to "*taking care of others' needs*", and is accomplished through *open communication, policy, and aggressive hospitality*. Furthermore, excellence is connected to *fiscal profit* (Newsome, 2000 p. 20). Although the external behavior of the leader in this example may appear to be servant leadership, the beliefs are externally imposed rather than internally derived, taught rather than internally conceived, with a focus ultimately on financial gain rather than serving. This process of philosophical

fragmentation may be common in practice. When alternative forms of influence are introduced to a phenomenon, the concept and meaning are altered (Dubin, 1963).

Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) offer the most notable contribution to any discussion on a philosophical framework for servant leadership. They contend Judeo Christian and biblical teaching are foundational to servant leadership as ontology and thus inform and direct the act of servant leadership. The original work of Greenleaf was grounded in an eastern paradigm (Greenleaf, 1996). The term paradigm as used here refers to the collective related concepts of phenomena (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Greenleaf's writings reflect his spiritual beliefs, his behaviors, and values. As a self-professed Quaker, he was influenced by community and commitment, the later being a commitment to grow in spiritual faith. Moreover, the Quaker faith is grounded in a biblical worldview that advocates for the integration of spiritual faith in all aspects of one's life.

Sendjaya & Sarros, (2004) contend that the spiritual foundation (holism) which grounds servant leadership has been the greatest cause of confusion regarding its acceptance and application in western culture (specifically the United States). Schaeffer's (1996) comprehensive analysis of theology, history, sociology and arts argues the current trend in western culture is away from the biblical or eastern paradigms (its original roots) of thinking toward a self-generated individualistic ideal. The role of spiritual beliefs in the formation of ontology, while simplified for the purpose of this discussion, is studied extensively in the discipline of spiritual psychology (Miovic, 2004).

In the Biblical Paradigm, the nature of being is to love God and man. Truth is revealed through biblical scripture, specifically the teachings of Jesus. One's act of serving is connected to being. The collectivistic focus is in alignment to biblical values, beliefs and faith. In the Eastern Paradigm, the nature of being is to discover the creator. Truth is discovered through intuition, reason, and integrity. One is to have a collectivistic focus and serving is a way of being. In Western Paradigm, the nature of being is to be enlightened, to become one with the creator. Truth is relative and centered on the individual. Reality and the universe is discovered. Knowledge is created and reason is limited. The focus is on individualism and serving is a way of doing (Miovic, 2004; Percy, 2004; Schaeffer, 1996; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2004).

There is Biblical precedent for servant leadership. Warren (2003) argues people are created to serve, are to make themselves available to serve, to pay attention to the needs of others, to do the best with the resources available, to do everything with equal dedication, to be faithful and humble (p. 257-264). In addition, the Biblical paradigm promotes the concept of *grace*, which is foundational to the altruistic nature and focus of a servant leader (Farling, Stone & Winston, 1998; Patterson, 2003; Russell, 2001). The integration of grace from God into one's being allows one to interact with others in the same manner. Others then do not need to do or act, they receive love and serve simply because of whom they are as fellow human beings (Schaeffer, 1978; Warren, 2002).

The very nature of being a servant as described by Greenleaf was an internalized calling to serve others. Integrity and alignment with one's own beliefs and values were imperative. This alignment should not be confused with a required spiritual conversion or religious affiliation. It is simply referring to an alignment with the core beliefs, values and assumptions that inform and direct the servant leaders' actions, which are more accurately reflected within a biblical or eastern paradigm. Greenleaf often signed his letters *in the spirit*, a confirmation of this alignment as a holistic self (Franklin Trask Library). Ethics and values that are grounded in a Biblical or eastern worldview are at the heart of the servant leader as it's axiology (Bass, 1990; Greenleaf, 1977; Patterson, 2003; Russell, 2001; Spears, 1995).

However, a comparison of virtues or values derived from spiritual teaching is superficial since these are informed by philosophy. For example, the core Buddhism's virtues appear compatible to those proposed by Patterson (2003) for a servant leader. Yet Monks may judge donor worthiness based on individual merit ultimately creating something similar to a caste system, valuing some individuals and not others (Brekke, 1998). Is this a world religion compatible to the same philosophical foundation of servant leadership? There is obvious incompatibility of the biblical and Western paradigms. Although humanism challenged the status quo of religious institutions, it offers the individual self-empowerment and individual focus (Miovic, 2004, p.107).

Greenleaf's Philosophical System

The leadership crisis that Greenleaf observed in organizations and on college campuses was the result of these ongoing debates about human value and purpose. Greenleaf spent most of his career in management, research, and education, beginning in the mid-1920's. He experienced the management practices promoted by Taylor and MacGregor, and studied how they influenced business leadership education. The consequence he believed was increased level of stress in organizations (Greenleaf, 1977). He wrote, "the enemy is strong natural leaders who have potential to lead but do not lead, or who choose to follow a non servant" (p.45).

It was these observations which led Greenleaf to challenge educational institutions and business organizations to consider their social and human obligation to develop leaders who seek to ultimately improve society in a

collectivistic rather than individualistic manner. What he proposed was a revolutionary paradigm shift in the role and assignment of leaders at that time. Greenleaf (1977) stated

A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. (p.10)

Servant leadership was derived through analogical or interpretive reasoning (Kneller, 1997) in which Greenleaf essentially used a metaphorical character (identified as a servant leader) and demonstrated leadership which aligned with his own values, beliefs, and knowledge to conceive servant leadership. When the historical context and philosophical underpinnings are connected, the following ensues. Greenleaf himself at the time of his writing was in a state of self-reflection. Historically the United States was in a cultural crossfire, questioning truth, values and authority. Self-serving leaders were surfacing with evil motives or personal agendas. Although Greenleaf himself referred to the need for adaptation to a eastern paradigm, it is conceivable since there was biblical precedence of servant leadership that he was referring to the eastern paradigm in its purest sense prior to the separation of theology and philosophy.

A vision or insight was the first step in the interpretive paradigm building that Greenleaf displays birthed out of fictional literature with a character that was a servant, but had the most powerful influence of all. Greenleaf believed the nature of man was to love and serve God and to love and serve others. The epistemology is biblical scripture, historical text, lived experience, alignment of reason, and psychological insight. The axiology is to serve, lead by serving, collectivism, holism, and social justice. Characteristic of the leader is an innate "calling" and desire to lead others. This derived out of a personal value, developmental process and the desire to serve others to better themselves. This was not a radical mind shift, but a renewed paradigm in that the focus of leadership was not on personal gain or enhancement but rather a result of and belief in serving others and the innate desire to invest in others first (Greenleaf, 1977; Zohar, 1997). This original premise provides a framework for a research-then- theory approach (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). A concern using the research then theory model could be the difficult task in identifying variables due to the lack of consensus among researchers (Reynolds, 1971). However, there are not however an infinite number of characteristics when there is adherence to Greenleaf's servant leadership philosophical system, thus theory building can ensue.

Implications for Research and HRD

Leadership research is generally grounded in the behavioral or natural sciences. As a result, there is a gap in the literature regarding the plausible connection between ontology and a leadership approach. It is reasonable that some leadership approaches have clear ontology. The ontology of servant leadership offers a set of beliefs that inform a set of natural laws that are relevant, and are not changeable. Empirical theory building will allow for the development of these concepts and inform implementation. Greenleaf's democratic educational idealism and empowerment philosophy can create an ecosystem that offers individuals and the organizations in which they work a foundation of something good.

Leadership is a social phenomenon that has not responded well to traditional fundamental paradigms (Gioria & Pitre, 1990; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998). Leadership itself is multidimensional in nature (Lynham, 2000). Scholars who have relied strictly on quantification and positivistic models are limited in scope concerning leadership development (Reynolds, 1990; Lynham, 2000; Gioria & Pitre, 1990). In order to perhaps better understand and develop leadership approaches that enhance individual and organizational performance, HRD scholars and researchers would benefit from embracing alternative knowledge building paradigms with inclusion of philosophical discussions.

If the field of Human Resource Development (HRD) is to move leadership to firmer foundation, theoretical development is imperative (Torracco, 1997; Lynham, 2000; Swanson, 1997). The development of any scientific concept through research begins with theory (Torracco, 1997; Swanson, 1997; Dubin, 1963; McMillian, 2000). Research done on behalf of servant leadership theory building is to further understanding, not to add to confusion. "Theory allows us to interpret new data, respond to new problems, define applied problems, evaluate solutions, discern priorities, interpret old data in new ways, identify new research directions, and supply practitioners and researchers with a common language and frame of reference" (Torraco, 1997, pp. 117-119).

Theory building in the servant leadership literature is necessary if we are to understand the strengths and limitations of this approach and its impact on individual and organizational performance. Although theory building can start by either inductive or deductive means, it ultimately seeks to identify generalizable truths. The philosophical framework given in this paper for servant leadership will enable the identification of servant leadership constructs and is the next logical step in the theory building cycle.

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