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Exercising Servant Leadership

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Exercising Servant Leadership

Abstract

{Excerpt} Servant leadership is now in the vocabulary of enlightened leadership. It is a practical, altruistic philosophy that supports people who choose to serve first, and then lead, as a way of expanding service to individuals and organizations. The sense of civil community that it advocates and engenders can facilitate and smooth successful and principled change.

Ancient schools of thought about great men and more recent (sometimes overlapping) explanations form an ever-growing literature on leadership. In modern times, three broad categories have encompassed related theories: approaches have explored the traits (1940s–1950s) then behaviors or styles (1950s–1960s) of successful leaders; examined the contextual nature of leadership and the role of followers (1960s–1970s); and investigated what interactions of traits, behaviors, and situations (as well as group facilitation) might allow people to transact or transform for excellence (1980s). At the risk of simplifying, notwithstanding a few notable exceptions, these perspectives have been hierarchical, linear, male, Newtonian, pragmatic, and, above all, concerned with the leader as an individual.

Keywords
Asian Development Bank, ADB, poverty, economic growth, sustainability, development

Comments

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Servant leadership is now in the vocabulary of enlightened leadership. It is a practical, altruistic philosophy that supports people who choose to serve first, and then lead, as a way of expanding service to individuals and organizations. The sense of civil community that it advocates and engenders can facilitate and smooth successful and principled change.

Preamble
On 1–3 July 1863, more than 158,000 soldiers fought near the market town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in what proved to be a turning point of the American Civil War (1861–1865). On 19 November 1863, President Abraham Lincoln dedicated the battlefield as a national cemetery. He gave the Gettysburg Address, one of the most quoted speeches in the history of the United States, in 10 sentences and about 2 minutes. Its last words—"government of the people, by the people, for the people, ..."—have come to define democracy to many.

Background
Ancient schools of thought about great men¹ and more recent (sometimes overlapping) explanations form an ever-growing literature on leadership.² In modern times, three broad categories have encompassed related theories: approaches have explored the traits (1940s–1950s) then behaviors or styles (1950s–1960s) of successful leaders; examined the contextual nature of leadership and the role of followers (1960s–1970s); and investigated what interactions of traits, behaviors, and situations (as well as group facilitation) might allow people to transact or transform for excellence (1980s).³ At the risk of simplifying,
notwithstanding a few notable exceptions, these perspectives have been hierarchical, linear, male, Newtonian, pragmatic, and, above all, concerned with the leader as an individual.

Leadership and the Challenge of Change

Theory and practice are inexorably intertwined: to understand developments in leadership theory is to fathom the nature of leadership itself. Leadership is difficult because, quintessentially, it must often focus on the challenge of change. Change that is transformational defies easy solutions: it involves value-laden issues; it tests strongly held loyalties; it surfaces deep-seated conflicts. But people do not resist change per se; rather, they refuse to accept the losses that it may cause them to incur. To exercise leadership is to invite people to make adaptive change (as distinct from technical change that concerned parties address daily)—for this they must learn new ways and discard old habits against the promise of an uncertain outcome. The process is intrinsically disruptive and therefore induces disequilibrium and stress.

In a globalizing world of organizations, pressures to change will only increase over the next decades. Given the complexity of the subject, new explanations of leadership are bound to arise and should influence how future leaders behave. Since much of leadership is about change, and the problems that leadership endeavors to address lie with people themselves, those in positions of authority are more often than not apt to collude and shy away from challenges. (Authority is a contract for services: for that reason, people in positions of authority are [paradoxically] rarely authorized to exercise transformational leadership, whatever the job description may advertise.) It follows that leadership of the people, by the people, for the people could conduce change better, coaxing them to clarify what is vital and what is not.

Figure: Shifting the Burden

Note: According to Fred Kofman and Peter Senge, one of the reasons the great man theory appeals is that it absolves us of responsibility for developing leadership capabilities more broadly. Viewed systemically, there is a “shifting the burden” structure: a perceived need for leadership (a symptom) can be met by developing capacities throughout the organization (the fundamental solution) or by relying on a heroic leader (the symptomatic solution). Success in finding a heroic leader reinforces beliefs in the group’s own powerlessness, thus making the fundamental solution more difficult.


4 Philip Selznick, a political sociologist, was initially ignored by the mainstream. As long ago as 1957, he compared leadership to institutionalization, in the sense that leadership is about infusing values and clarifying purpose in an organization. See Philip Selznick. 1957. Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation. Harper & Row. In 1978, James MacGregor Burns, a biographer, historian, and political scientist, infused his model of transformational leadership with ethical and moral dimensions, and was the first to see the need for leaders to develop a binding and mutually stimulating relationship with followers. See James MacGregor Burns. 1978. Leadership. Harper & Row.

5 Changingminds.org summarizes succinctly the tenets of the main models of leadership. Available: http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/theories/leadership_theories.htm


7 It is at times of organizational strain that effective leaders can make a significant and visible impact.
The Distribution of Leadership
The idea of the leader may be misplaced, at least in complex, modern organizations. The trends in leadership theory are clear: explanations have moved from heroic leadership to leadership by power and influence, thence to the interactive nature of leadership, and of late to leadership by consent. If leaders (can be made to) exist throughout an organization, the future may witness the spread of leadership groups, not individual leaders. (Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith have written about the “following part of leading.”)  

Since the 1990s, two interrelated schools of thought with foundations in humanistic psychology, philosophy, politics, social psychology, and sociology rather than management science and psychology, have received growing recognition. They promote people-oriented, or servant, leadership and offer promising notions of informal, emergent, dispersed, or distributed leadership.  

Exercising Servant Leadership …
The philosophy and practice of servant leadership was coined and defined by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s. The general concept is ancient, with roots in China (Lao Tzu) and India (Chanakya). Jesus of Nazareth urged his followers to be servants first, and became a messenger of a great religion. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then, conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. Servant leadership seems to touch an innate need in many and probably harks back to the beginning of time.  

• Definition and Best Test. Servant leadership is about moving people to a higher level of individual and communal self-awareness by leading people at a higher level. Its principal tenet is that it is the duty of a leader to serve followers, his or her key role being to develop, enable, and support team members, helping them fully develop their potential and deliver their best. From this perspective, in a world of organizations,
servant-leaders are considered humble stewards of their organization’s resources and capabilities. In a 1970 essay, The Servant as Leader, Greenleaf explained:

*The servant-leader is servant first ... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions ... The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.*

This is no pie in the sky: the proof of the pudding is in the eating and the test of a servant-leader is one of pragmatism based on visible outcomes. Greenleaf continued:

*The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?*

Importantly, neither Greenleaf’s definition of a servant-leader nor its best test requires one to hold a formal leadership position. What matters is what we do in “our little corner of the world” and why we are doing it. Indeed, servant-leaders turn leadership into a territory, a field of endeavor in which people can operate—each leveraging individual abilities and capacities—to serve the mission of the organization and the people who make the organization happen. The objective, to repeat, is to enhance the growth of individuals in organizations and promote teamwork and personal involvement.

**Servant-Leader Attributes.** Larry Spears,15 who served for 17 years as the head of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership,16 identified in Greenleaf’s writings 10 characteristics of servant-leaders. They are by no means exhaustive but he views them as central to the development of servant-leaders. (They are, primarily, behavioral in nature.) The attributes are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and (a concern for) building community. Unlike the models mentioned earlier, which gaze at leadership through the prism of top-down organizational hierarchies, servant leadership emphasizes collaboration, empathy, trust, and the ethical use of power.17

**Caveat.** Servant leadership does not pose as an explanatory or quick-fix theory: it cannot be readily instilled in an organization. But it is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work—in short a way of being—that has the potential to generate positive change in its milieu: when followers see evidence that their leaders truly follow the ideals of servant leadership, they are more likely to become servants themselves.

... With Distributed Leadership

The distributed leadership approach views leadership as a social contract. It shifts the emphasis from developing leaders to developing “leaderful” organizations through concurrent, collective, and compassionate leadership with a collective responsibility for the latter. The distributed leadership theory

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15 Larry Spears (ed.). 1998. Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Larry Spears’ identification of themes can help operationalize the concept of servant leadership. A few servant leadership assessment instruments have already been formulated; since the concept continues to gain attention in practice, we can expect to see additional research in the area.

16 Available: www.greenleaf.org/

17 Daniel Goleman’s model of emotional intelligence is (almost uncannily) applicable to servant leadership.
Exercising Servant Leadership

• Regards leadership as a process of sense making and direction giving—this constitutes a move from individuals to relationships.
• Rejects the notion of heroic leaders and the focus on top management, and submits a less formalized model whereby leadership is dissociated from organizational hierarchies.
• Distinguishes the exercise of leadership and the exercise of authority, and treats leadership as a decentralized activity that is not, unavoidably, the sole responsibility of formally appointed leaders.
• Aims to nurture leadership capacity through the development of leadership processes and skills in others

Further Reading


For further information
Contact Olivier Serrat, Head of the Knowledge Management Center, Regional and Sustainable Development Department, Asian Development Bank (oserrat@adb.org).
ADB’s vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region’s many successes, it remains home to two thirds of the world’s poor: 1.8 billion people who live on less than $2 a day, with 903 million struggling on less than $1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

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