

Leadership, Leadership Styles, and Servant Leadership

Franco Gandolfi and Seth Stone

Abstract

Research on leadership has become a prominent scholarly and professional pursuit in an ever-changing, highly complex, and multi-dimensional globalized world. In spite of an over-abundance of scientific and anecdotal work, a myriad of leadership-related questions have remained unanswered. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to demystify leadership and to bring clarity to what leadership and leadership styles are, identify critical attributes of effective leadership, and demonstrate that servant leadership meets the criteria for effective leadership.

Keywords: Leadership, Leadership Styles, Servant Leadership

INTRODUCTION

There perhaps has never been a more important time to shine the spotlight of the wide-ranging discussion on leadership to the style of servant leadership. The lists of potential reasons for such a shift are many. First, it requires little more than a brief scan of daily news headlines to recognize that the world is entrenched in a leadership crisis. Second, leadership has become increasingly more difficult, complex, and multi-faceted for organizations of all types globally, thereby bringing new questions and challenges regarding the “best” type of leader, which ironically has done little more than cloud the overarching discussion on leadership (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). Further, despite the significant body of literature on

leadership, it continues to remain one of the most misunderstood business phenomena to date (Gandolfi, 2016). If the goal is to understand the consequences of leadership and its various styles, specifically servant leadership, it is important first to bring clarity to what leadership is and why it is such a pivotal concept.

Though there has been substantial research completed and authenticated with regard to what are now considered mainstream styles of accepted leadership, such as democratic, transactional, and transformational leadership, there is very little research on servant leadership by way of actual comparison (Gandolfi, Stone, & Deno, 2017). Robert Greenleaf (1970) had brought servant leadership into the corporate spotlight, but not without resistance and much skepticism, as it took nearly thirty years to begin garnering any meaningful attention from leadership experts and scholars (Gandolfi et al., 2017). At this juncture, in the midst of trying to understand leadership itself, it is imperative to simultaneously understand what servant leadership is and is not (Brown & Bryant, 2015), as a means to make a compelling case for its application alongside other accepted leadership styles.

Franco Gandolfi

Vice Chancellor
Manipal International University (MIU)
Nilai, Negeri Sembilan - 71800
Malaysia

Seth Stone

Adjunct Professor
Regent University
Virginia Beach, Virginia – 23464,
USA

The purpose of this paper is to help bring clarity both to what leadership and leadership styles actually are, as well as identify critical attributes of effective leadership. The objective is to demonstrate that servant leadership meets the criteria for effective leadership and is potentially highly desirable for organizations of all type and industry in the 21st Century and beyond. This paper will begin with a brief explanation of the importance of leadership, as well as provide working definitions for both leadership and leadership styles. It will then distill the key attributes of effective leadership and make the case that servant leadership holds a rightful place amongst other leadership styles. This is done by providing a historical context, as well as how and why servant leadership works and must be applied in today's organizations.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEADERSHIP

While there is much disagreement with regard to what leadership actually is, the one commonality that can be found across virtually all of the existing leadership literature is that leadership is important. While this point may appear rather obvious, it should not be lost on us. The reason being is that when leadership is ineffective, absent, or toxic the result is that people, organizations, communities, and even entire societies are impacted, sometimes in the most devastating ways (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). Leadership failures are well-documented and, at times, appear to be the rule, not the exception. Ken Lay of Enron, Dennis Kozlowski of Tyco, and the infamous Bernie Madoff are just a few well-documented business examples that can be pointed to the past few decades alone. More recent examples include the much publicized FIFA leadership fiasco and the Volkswagen integrity crises and, even more recently, the clear lack of leadership at the Olympic Games in Brazil. The latter was evidenced by complete leadership failure both by the athletes who represented their respective countries as well as the local leadership (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). There are always lessons and takeaways in the moment that spark discussions on ethics, policies, and even government regulations. However, leadership problems persist even in spite of these efforts. It appears that poor

leadership has become a systemic issue on a global level, thus it is not surprising to see more and more cases such as these to arise. In fact, a Gallup study that examined the relationships between employees and their managers found that of 7,200 people surveyed who left their jobs; roughly half did so because of a bad manager (Snyder, 2015). This insight shows that no organization or industry is immune from poor leadership leading some to believe that it could even be characterized as ubiquitous (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). Poor leadership takes its toll on every imaginable stakeholder from those inside and outside the organizations. This reality places leadership in a state of crisis on a global level. Therefore, there must be a sense of urgency in the uncovering of the most desirable and effective methods for leading organizations.

How a leader chooses to behave, or in more academic terminology how a leader accesses a repertoire of styles, impacts the various stakeholders profoundly. Chaleff (2009) posits that all important social accomplishments require complex group efforts and, thus, leadership and followership are both necessary in the pursuit of a common purpose. This inherently forces leaders to emerge, but the type of leader that rises to the top will indeed make or break the organization. From a purely organizational perspective, without clearly drawn maps to the future, an organization tends to be hamstrung by its past (Miller, 1995). It is the responsibility of leadership to move organizations to a desired future state without losing sight of those who will get it there. It is an extremely difficult balancing act. However, it is what makes leadership so incredibly significant and demonstrates why the chosen leadership style is a decision with the highest of stakes the global community faces today.

DEFINING LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP STYLE

There are countless definitions of leadership that exist. Yet, a proper understanding of why leadership is so significant and why the chosen leadership style is so important becomes

particularly valuable to introduce working definitions of both leadership and leadership style. Gandolfi (2016) asserts that the combination of five components render a potent working definition of leadership - (i) there must be one or more leaders, (ii) leadership must have followers, (iii) it must be action oriented with a legitimate (iv) course of action, and there must be (v) goals and objectives. Working from these five criteria, the following definition was selected for the purpose of this article:

“A leader is one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization’s mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives.” (Winston & Patterson, 2006, p. 7)

Winston and Patterson (2006) provide a definition as it relates to the components needed for defining leadership as stated above. Additionally, this definition provides an unequivocal demonstration that leadership is not one-dimensional. Rather, leadership requires a deep understanding about the role of people in the ultimate success of the mission and vision of the organization (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). This assists in moving leadership out of a theoretical realm into a very tangible and pragmatic space, giving room to explore leadership styles and how they connect to a definition such as this.

While a significant body of research exists addressing various leadership styles, there is a surprising shortcoming of research examining the notion of a leadership “style” (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). It is almost a forgone assumption that there is general understanding and consensus with regard to what a leadership style is, which is erroneous and does not serve the greater discussion on leadership well. Such a lack of clarity could be contributing to the widely disparate views on leadership (Gandolfi et al., 2017).

Buchanan (2013) opines that the world has moved through different phases of leadership since the early part of the 20th Century. Specifically, there was first the concept of “command-and-control” that prevailed into the 1980s, which was followed by “empower-and-track” through the mid 2000’s, and, finally, “connect-and-nurture,” which is the current approach. While this timeframe may not hold universally true, it provides a high-level justification as to why different leadership styles have emerged. Additionally, early theories of leadership had made the assumption that good leadership was based on traits (Shazia, Anis-ul-Haq, & Niazi, 2014). This led to the notion that leaders are born and not made.

It was the well-known psychologist Kurt Lewin and team (1939) who introduced that leaders could be made and were not necessarily just born. In their seminal work, Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) categorized and introduced three leadership styles that set the framework for future styles to emerge – autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire (Martin, 2015). Additional styles began to focus on the leader/follower relationship and how the actions of one will impact the other (Shazia et al., 2014).

Armandi, Oppedisano, and Sherman (2003) note that leadership is about influencing a group of people in the direction of a decided common goal. Leadership is also highly intentional. Rooke and Torbert (2005) assert that differences among leaders are not determined by their philosophy of leadership, personality, or even management style. Rather, it has to do with how they read and interpret their surroundings and how those interpretations influence reactions leaders have in various situations. This requires a high degree of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and environmental context both inside and outside the organization (Rooke & Torbert, 2005).

Leadership effectiveness in the eyes of followers is closely tied to the leader being driven, able to inspire, and prioritize needs, which in turn produces a sense of safety and calm for followers (McDermott, Kidney, & Flood, 2013). This points directly to the connection between leader and

follower as outlined by Winston and Patterson (2006).

With this understanding of how leadership styles developed over time, the authors of this paper defined a leadership style as follows:

“An intentional means by which a leader influences a group of people in an organization to a widely understood future state that is different from the present one.” (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016)

It is important to note that this definition does not indicate a better future, merely a different future state. Research shows that not all leadership styles will lead to a better organizational future state. Thus, making the selection of leadership style is a pivotal decision and, in the midst of the current leadership crisis, it is time to turn the attention to a style still widely dismissed - servant leadership.

UNDERSTANDING TRULY EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Prior to delving into servant leadership specifically, it is important to note the principles of effective leadership based on what has been presented thus far. First are two guiding principles, (i) virtually everyone has some capacity to form leadership relationships (Gandolfi, 2016), and (ii) leaders are made and not born (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). Andersen (2012) postulates that while some people are born with innate qualities and character attributes that propel and/or accelerate their leadership journey, the vast majority of people live in a practical reality where their leadership skills must be intentionally cultivated to achieve their maximum potential leadership output. Such cultivation cannot happen without relationships (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998).

Kouzes and Posner (2007) have produced some of the most authoritative research on the subject of leadership effectiveness and arrived at five key attributes. These are; (i) to model the way, (ii) to inspire a shared vision, (iii) to challenge the process, (iv) to enable others to act, and (v) to encourage the heart. Understanding these elements of effective leadership provides critical context for

why a deeper exploration of servant leadership is necessary in today's leadership climate.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Servant leadership dates back thousands of years. Many ancient monarchies had widely acknowledged that leadership was for the service of people and country (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). In a more modern context, Greenleaf (1970) reinvigorated the notion of the servant leader.

Though in some circles servant leadership is falsely assumed as a Christian paradigm, servant leadership has influenced and been influenced by many cultures around the world (Gandolfi et al., 2017). Winston and Ryan (2008) posit that the teachings of Confucius are similar in construct to servant leadership and some of the constructs of servant leadership show up in the Zhou Dynasty (111 - 249 B.C.). The traditional tribal leadership of the Bedouin-Arab culture also aligned with the concept of servant leadership, as these leaders were expected to be selfless and emphasize the needs of family and guests above their own (Hirschy, Gomez, Patterson, & Winston, 2012).

One of the best-recorded examples of servant leadership is derived from the teachings of Jesus Christ among the Jewish culture nearly two thousand years ago. Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) state that Jesus was the first to “introduce the notion of servant leadership to everyday human endeavor” (p. 58). Such teaching was paradoxical two thousand years ago, and in many respects, still presents a conundrum today as the notion of the leader as a servant appears as nothing short of an oxymoron.

In the 20th Century, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. serve as prominent examples of servant leadership. While they slightly predate Greenleaf's (1970) description of the servant leader, the alleged ten characteristics of servant leadership (Spears, 2004) exist in both examples. Spears (2004) clarifies Greenleaf's definition of servant leadership by presenting ten salient

characteristics - listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth of people, and building community (Gandolfi et al., 2017). Spears's (2004) introduction of this characteristic model has re-ignited the systematic study of servant leadership in the 21st Century. Consequently, studies on servant leadership proliferated resulting in 39 articles published in reputable management journals between 2004 and 2011 alone (Parris & Peachey, 2013).

Despite its introduction as an organizational leadership style four decades ago and more than ten years of empirical work (Laub, 1999), servant leadership has remained in the early stage of theoretical development (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014). Though our understanding of servant leadership has advanced, it has not yet been fully operationalized (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

THE WHAT, WHY, AND HOW OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

The dichotomous nature of servant leadership has the capacity to lead to a general misunderstanding of what the concept entails (Gandolfi et al., 2017). Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) suggest that one of the reasons servant leadership suffers from a scarcity of research is that it is difficult to create a legitimate perception of a servant who leads. A confusion is thus quite possible due to an incorrect understanding of the roles of a leader and a servant. Historically speaking, the trait theory of leadership stemming from the 'great man myth' (Hoffman, Woehr, Maldagen-Youngjohn, & Lyons, 2011) identified leadership with traits that allowed leaders to lead with authority and power (Mcfarlane, 2011). The great man myth perception of leadership says little of interpersonal skills needed to lead well (Yukl, 2012). On the other hand, the humility and meekness of the servant are "seen as weak or ineffective in a society where domination, oppressive strategies, and individualism are stronger values than humility, collectivism, and sharing of power and authority with others" (Mcfarlane, 2011, p. 31). These misconceptions of leader and servant have produced a belief that servant

leaders engage a lackadaisical or laissez-faire style. Plainly, servant leadership is neither disengaged nor weak and it does not lack enthusiasm and determination (i.e., lackadaisical). It also does not let things take their own course without interfering (i.e., laissez-faire) (Gandolfi et al., 2017). Servant leaders are as proactive, ambitious, and driven as any other leader. They just have a different focus and set of motivation that guide their leadership and decision making. In fact, what differentiates servant leadership from other styles of leadership is the primary focus on the follower first (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Whereas many, if not most styles of leadership direct their focus first on a mission and second on empowering followers to achieve that mission, servant leadership directs its focus first on the ability of the individuals to succeed and then subsequently on the success of the mission. Again, this is counterintuitive to most modern schools of management and leadership thought. In this way, the servant leader serves those who follow their lead and collectively with their team serve an organization or mission (Gandolfi et al., 2017). This leadership focus reveals strength through discipline and humility requiring the leader to put their own needs after the needs of those they serve. Servant leaders help their followers to grow and succeed, which in turn aids in accomplishing the organizational mission. The perception of a servant leader should be one of a courageous steward who holds people accountable for their own good (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

By the very nature of how servant leadership must be executed, it is an immensely difficult task. In fact, it could be argued that it is more challenging than most if not all other prevalent styles. This is due to the fact that, in practical reality, it is often easier to require follower compliance than it is to inspire a willing acceptance of the requirements needed to meet an organizational mission and vision (Patterson, 2006). Thus, it is little wonder why for the scholastic and practitioner communities alike, a philosophy rooted in placing the needs of followers ahead of the needs of the organization is counter-intuitive to what so many have believed to be a logical or viable form of organizational leadership (Brown & Bryant, 2015).

This poses an immediate question: Why would an organization seek to embrace servant leadership? Servant leaders, at their core, are those individuals who develop and empower others to reach their highest potential (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). This speaks directly to the individual potential of the follower(s) rather than the organization. Servant leadership assumes that if the followers are maximizing their potential, it will directly translate to the potential of the organization and its overall performance.

Interestingly, Graham (1991) as well as Farling, Stone, and Winston, (1999) assert that servant leadership is comparable to Burns' (1978) transforming leadership, in that both approaches encourage leaders and followers to "raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality." (p. 20). However, while both styles of leadership share this commonality, this is where their similarities end.

Management and organization theory suggests that the most traditional approaches have a tendency to consolidate power amongst few people within an entity, who in turn expect rigid compliance within and across the organizational hierarchy (Winston & Fields, 2015). As such and strictly within this context, charismatic and transformational styles focus on inspiring and engaging followers as chief means to attain organizational goals (Winston & Fields, 2015).

A combination of philosophical assumptions as well as tangible and empirical evidence suggest that servant leadership not only "work", but can be touted as effective and desirable. Servant leadership works because it incorporates a proven element of effective leadership. Still, effective leadership is neither linear nor is it a one-way form of communication or event. Rather, it is highly interactive (Northouse, 2007). The notion of leadership being a two-way relationship renders many archaic leadership styles as ineffective. Servant leadership is increasingly being seen as the most interactive style of leadership when it comes to leader/follower engagement. This is due to the fact that the primary emphasis for attaining organizational goals is based on serving the

followers tasked with achieving those.

Manby (2012) and Stone (2015) suggest that when servant leadership is applied correctly with the proper intentions, an authentic and natural form of reciprocity takes place between the leader and the follower, thus increasing workforce engagement and improving organizational performance (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017).

Servant leadership also works from a purely moral perspective. Corporate crises and political scandals have dominated news headlines across the globe. At the time of writing, Malaysia and its much publicized 1MDB scandal have riveted much of the South-Asians media headlines for most of 2017 and 2018. These crises and scandals seem to emerge in spite of the imposition of stringent rules and regulations from governments and ethics boards alike. Price (2004) states that humans are more likely to behave immorally when there is sufficient reason to believe that we have run out of interests to behave morally. With an understanding of and considering Spears' (2004) ten characteristics of servant leadership, there is arguably no morally virtuous leadership style in existence today.

While moral and ethical leadership failure are plausible in a servant-led firm, servant leadership acts as the best safeguard against these types of failures based on what we know about the phenomenon to date. From a follower perspective, today's workforce is far removed from the days of job security, pension plans, and employer-sponsored incentives that were made readily available as recently as one or two workforce generations ago.

Finally, Collins (2001) identified a Level 5 leader which "blends extreme personal humility with intense professional will" (p. 21). To date, servant leadership is the only style that prescriptively calls for personal humility as one of the keys to successful implementation. The authors of this paper contend that servant leadership fits seamlessly within the context of what Collins identifies as the highest level of leadership. Making servant leadership a highly desirable leadership style in theory and due to the fact that servant leadership can now be quantitatively measured, it becomes

easier for even the greatest of skeptics to see its viability and potency of this often misunderstood concept.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The purpose of this paper was to bring clarity to what leadership and leadership styles are, identify critical attributes of effective leadership, and demonstrate that servant leadership meets the criteria for effective leadership. Greenleaf's (1970) thrusting of servant leadership into the corporate spotlight was the most significant contribution to servant leadership to date. Examples of servant leader such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther

King, Jr., and Mother Teresa demonstrate that Greenleaf did not resurrect a dead practice. Rather, he began to articulate and operationalize an ongoing practice and thus an important step toward current organizational understanding. While Greenleaf's (1970) contributions are significant, they have failed to demystify the practice of servant leadership. More recent work by Patterson (2006), Winston & Patterson (2006), Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011), Brown & Bryant (2015), and Gandolfi & Stone (2016) have contributed to a functional understanding of servant leadership. Further research on servant leadership must foster more widespread understanding and acceptance of its viability in contemporary organizations.

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