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The Foundation of Servant Leadership Theory

The ideas and concepts for servant leadership have been around for centuries in different forms. Even when Aristotle and later Aquinas discussed leadership, they pondered the concepts of virtues as an important component of human life and leadership. Other philosophers such as Plato discussed leadership but with some different ideas that became mainstream ideas for ruling and power. This focus on power carried the day in leadership thinking with concepts of leadership like in Machiavelli's *The Prince* that endorsed a power center to leadership. This power focus on leadership developed over the centuries, while in other contexts alternative concepts for leadership became part of the lived experiences of leaders. Diverse concepts for leaders were lived and developed, but the power focus of leadership rose to ascendancy over the years.

Servant Leadership According to Greenleaf

In the 1970s, in the midst of a hotbed of leadership theory development, Robert Greenleaf proposed an idea about the servant being the leader. According to Greenleaf (2002), his book on servant leadership was written through a process of 20 years of talks and articles with the

hope and design that leaders would learn to serve their followers with skill, understanding, and spirit. This idea grew into a concept of leadership in the writings of Greenleaf that was developed and popularized in the writings of Greenleaf and later with several other authors like Larry Spears. Greenleaf (2002) believed that there were students who were looking for a better way to lead and there were others as well like trustees and clergy in the churches who wanted more effective models for leadership. He introduced this way of leading as leading as a servant. He summarizes his concept of this type of leader as one who is servant first and this begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve but then there is a conscious choice from there that one wants to lead (Greenleaf, 2002). The movement then is not from leading to serving but from serving to leading.

This way of thinking calls for a new kind of leadership model that puts serving others as the top priority including employees, customers, and the community at large and a number of institutions have adopted this servant-leader approach (Spears, 1998). This model has been adopted, discussed, and lived by many in several different fields. As this model has moved from theory to practice, there are others who have developed and adapted this model in many different contexts. There are business leaders who have practiced this model for over 25 years and continue to use it, and this leadership thinking has also influenced many noted writers, thinkers, and leaders (Spears, 1998). The influence and popularity of this way of thinking about leadership grew through the later twentieth century.

In this process, ten characteristics for servant leadership were developed from the writings of this model. The ten characteristics of servant leadership were identified as listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 1998). These ten concepts have been researched and developed for use as components of servant leadership with good progress of this model as an effective form of leadership. Servant leadership is viewed as a leadership model that is helpful to organizations by engaging and developing employees and beneficial to followers by engaging people as whole persons with heart, mind, and spirit and

it is not limited to Western culture (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2010). Greenleaf (2002) even discusses many different contexts in his later chapters as he addresses the issues of cross-cultural leadership.

Then his final chapter turns to the inward journey through the use of poetry and Scripture. Though this is the foundation of servant leadership from an organizational perspective, it has some beginnings of looking to Scripture and particularly the life and ministry of Jesus as a model for leadership. These early concepts have been the fountainhead of much discussion and debate about this philosophy or model or principle of leadership. This thinking began in the 1970s with Robert Greenleaf however; others in the twenty-first century began to think and do research on this way of leading to develop a robust model for effective leadership.

Servant Leadership in Twenty-First-Century Literature

In the twenty-first century, there was an explosion of literature in many areas of leadership theory and thinking. Some of these areas included virtues and even spirituality as an important component of leadership and leadership development. It was in the early years of this century that authentic leadership was developed as a result of the large scandals in the business world of this time period. As it was developed, there was a spiritual component of this model developed by Klenke (2007). There were other theories as well like adaptive leadership theory (Northouse, 2015).

In this context, there emerged several new ideas and models concerning servant leadership. Just before the turn of the century, Spears (1998) had already been developing some of the concepts of servant leadership in cooperation with other leadership scholars and practitioners such as Stephen Covey, Peter Senge, James Kouzes, Margaret Wheatley, and others. They were exploring different aspects of servant leadership based on the Greenleaf model of leadership.

As the twenty-first century dawned, there were ideas and new priorities in leadership thinking and development. Northouse (2015) described servant leadership as a theory that did not have much empirical evidence

with most of the writing on this model being prescriptive rather than focusing on the practice of this way of leadership however; in the twenty-first century, more evidence and research had substantiated and clarified this model. Servant leadership was used by different organizations and endorsed by leadership thinkers and writers, but it still needed further development for use as a theory of leadership. So, the twenty-first century brought an explosion of research in new areas of leadership and leadership development. In this explosion of research, several scholars developed different and diverse attributes and measurements for servant leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Laub, 1999; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; Wong & Davey, 2007). In these studies, the characteristics were both extensive and diverse with a lack of agreement on the characteristics that define servant leadership (Northouse, 2015).

In the midst of this time period, Patterson (2003) developed a model that is virtue based for leadership. This model was further clarified and explained by Winston (2003), who defined and expanded some of the terms used in this model of leadership. The literature concerning servant leadership continues to grow with more variations. However, since this Patterson model is virtue based, it has potential for more development and growth.

In addition, the issues of the twenty-first century have focused on developing ethical models of leadership or at least developing models with ethics in mind for the process of leadership development. This focus of leadership studies in general brings this model of servant leadership to an important place to be examined and developed for use in this present context. The question remains as to how leadership models can be developed that can produce effective and ethical leaders. Ciulla (2014) proposes that leadership needs to be good in two senses, ethical and effective. It is this search for good leadership in these two senses that drives the passion for the development of this model for servant leadership. But is this enough? Is there more beyond this model that serves leaders in their pursuit of good and even great leadership that includes virtues as well as effectiveness? Then the question goes even farther in asking if these are the only two components of good leadership. To answer these questions it takes a deeper look at this Patterson model.

Servant Leadership According to Patterson and Winston

Some of the foundational ideas for the further development of servant leadership came from Winston and Patterson. Winston gave some new terminology for this construct in using the word *agapao* for the leadership idea of love. Patterson developed a virtue-based model for servant leadership that built upon the ideas of Greenleaf but expanded it. In her model, the virtues of leadership are the central issue however; it is done in such a way that it facilitates the ability to research this theory of leadership for further development.

According to Patterson, servant leadership is based on love (2010). However, there are more virtues that come from this foundation of love producing a virtuous model of leadership. There are seven virtuous constructs in this model of servant leadership. These seven constructs are *agapao* love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service (Patterson, 2003). These constructs interact with each other ultimately expressing service to others. It begins the process with love or *agapao*. According to Winston (2002), this is the Greek term for moral love; it is to love in a social or moral sense. Fortunately, Greek has several Greek words for different ideas where we use only one word in English. Therefore, it is important to understand this word in this social context. It is where the leader considers the needs of the followers and where the leader considers each person as a total person with unique needs, desires, and wants even learning about the giftings and talents of each follower (Patterson, 2003). Love in this way is important in an organizational setting. Love in leadership is an atmosphere where respect, trust, and dignity are fostered and this is where followers can thrive and this love becomes a force that changes lives of both follower and leader (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2010). It is here in the foundation that there can be seen a difference between this model and the Greenleaf model. The Greenleaf model begins with the desire to serve, while the Patterson model begins with moral and social love as the foundation. Does this make enough of a difference? Both are based on the model of serving first. Many of the other discussions on servant leadership have this concept of serving first. However, the Patterson model develops through

virtuous constructs rather than behaviors. This then makes it a model that can be developed using internal issues of the person rather than external behaviors. It is then ontological in nature in that it deals with the person of the leader first rather than the external behaviors first. This could be more of a challenge for development, but it makes it more open to research that deals with internal issues like dealt with in Scripture and the issues of character.

The model then moves from the issue of love to humility. This is an often missed but a key ingredient of good leadership. There is a growing call for humility in leadership in spite of the fixation on charismatic appeal for leaders (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005). Collins (2001) even declares that deep personal humility is one of the only two important ingredients for great leadership. Others have discussed this connection between servant leadership and humility as well (Anderson, 2008; Greenleaf, 2002; Winston, 2002). However, it is important to understand this concept of humility. It is not a low opinion of self. Humility is a personal orientation based upon the willingness to see self accurately putting oneself in perspective with neither self-abasement nor overly positive self-regard (Morris et al., 2005). This concept of humility in connection with leadership is a growing discussion but it fits well within the framework of this model of servant leadership.

Then altruism is the next virtue in this model servant leadership. Altruism is that which benefits another person often involving risk or sacrifice for one's own personal interests (Kaplan, 2000). This virtue would involve the servant leader overcoming significant self-issues like insecurities and overt self-interest. Vision is the next attribute in connection to this model. Vision is rarely considered a virtue. It is an important component for many models of leadership including some of the more contemporary models like transformational leadership. However, this vision becomes a virtue when it is focused on the vision for the follower rather than for the organization. The servant leader's focus is on the individual and this vision is looking forward and seeing the individual as a viable and worthy person and helping that individual become that person (Patterson, 2003). The vision is for the individual and how they can become a better person in a holistic sense, not just as a function at a job. This sets this model apart in that the other models of leadership focus on

vision for the strategy of the organization whereas here the vision is to develop the followers in the organization who impact the organization but the goal is the follower first. Servant leaders are focused on their followers seeing them for who they can become and serving them as such whereby the followers are the primary concern (Dennis, Kinzler-Norheim, & Bocarnea, 2010). Servant leadership in this way focuses on the follower through addressing internal issues in the leader.

Trust is the next virtue in servant leadership here in this model and way of doing leadership. Trust is seen as part of the transforming influence of servant leadership by Sendjaya (2010) and he calls unreserved trust one of the ingredients for the transformation of followers in many dimensions. Trust is one of the ingredients produced in an atmosphere of love in leadership (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2010). Trust can be seen in two directions. The first direction is the follower trusting the leader but the second direction is the leader trusting the follower. So, trust needs to flow in both directions. However, trust coming from the leader can help develop trust in the follower. This cannot produce trust from the follower without the leader being trustworthy. This is where servant leadership enters the equation. Trust is built upon the other attributes of this model of leadership. When the leader expresses moral love and altruism with good in the heart of the leader for the followers in the context of true humility, the leader builds a solid foundation for trust—trust from the followers. In addition, humble leaders recognize their own shortcoming, and with this revelation, they are able to more readily trust other imperfect individuals. Excellence is not perfection; it is much more than perfection. Perfection is in meeting a certain expectation fully. Nevertheless, excellence is to exceed expectations with a learning process as a result of failures and successes. Excellence, to work correctly, needs to be filled with grace and proper motive. Perfection is a hard task master but excellence is an easy yoke that is filled with expectation instead of fear. So, what is trust? Trust has to do with being predictable and reliable and integrity makes a leader worthy of trust (Northouse, 2015). Trust is the confident relationship built between people who can be relied upon even in difficult situations. People you can trust whether followers or leaders are those who will not throw you under the bus when times are difficult. Collins (2001) says that great leaders are the ones who give

credit to followers when all is well and progress is made, but then when there is trouble or hindrance, the leader looks at his/her own contributions as the problem. He calls this humility. However, this is also trust, trust in others and building a foundation of trust from others.

The final virtue and the ultimate virtue in servant leadership is that of service or to serve. The idea of servant is deep in the Judeo-Christian heritage yet society appears to be a low-caring society with some notable servants but they seem to be losing ground to the nonserving people (Spears, 1998). This confusion adds to the dilemma in defining and then living as a servant in contemporary society. Where are the contemporary role models for this important ingredient? This is why Guinness (2003) laments the lack of heroes in our day when people are famous for being famous rather than for some exceptional quality or deed like putting others first. Service is a virtue in giving of oneself with generosity toward others in a variety of ways including giving time, compassion, and even of physical belongings (Patterson, 2003). To serve is to give of self when it is not an obligation; it is not a mandate to be fulfilled but a passion for others to be lived and done with compassion. However, even these words like “compassion” must be used carefully since there are so many who would define these concepts of giving, or serving or even compassion in various ways with practical implications as each definition takes root and heads in different directions. Therefore, the need is seen here for more research in these areas to seek out the nuances and the veracity of this theory. In addition, as these attributes are examined, they will need definitions that can bear the weight of this theory of leadership.

Servant Leadership Research

As of today, there have been several other authors who have entered this field of research for servant leadership doing research in different cultures and contexts. Research has been done in African nations, in military contexts, and based upon the life and teachings of Jesus. As research has been done, some have begun to develop theories that are sensitive to these contexts, like Wilkes (1998) who developed a concept for leadership based upon the life and teachings of Jesus or Bell (2014) who developed

leadership principles from both Old and New Testaments based upon the servant models found in Scripture. Many scholars have worked on developing a model of servant leadership recently. Among these scholars are Patterson (2003) and Winston (2003), but there are others as well like Russell (2001). These scholars have used differing theories and developed different models. In this process, some have begun to look at Hebrew and Christian Scriptures for a foundation for this theory as well as insight for nuances to improve this model of leadership.

The Next Steps in Leadership

In this endeavor, as some researchers have begun to look at the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures for guidance, there is a call for a more developed theory of leadership. This call is to analyze the best theoretical models in conjunction with divine insights from the text of Scripture. This is a call to think theologically from the perspective of foundations for leadership. Thinking theologically is a view from the perspective of divine intention and prerogative rather than a view from below which is anthropological (which is finding truth as it happens but it is troubled by distorted self-issues). Science asks for an outside objective viewpoint but is that possible when we study ourselves wherein we are the researcher and the researched? Theology lifts us out of this research circle so we can catch a glimpse from above concerning the human issue of leadership. This study expands this research in looking to the Scriptures in cooperation with the science of organizational leadership for divine perspective on servant leadership and its implications for leadership that can be applied in the multiple contexts of the twenty-first century, to the church, government, military, nonprofits, education, and the world of business. Science and theology are both concerned with search for truth. They share common ways of approaching this search for understanding and a common conviction that there is truth to be sought (Polkinghorne, 2007). The question is whether the Scriptures endorse, critique, or expand the concept of servant leadership. Further, the deeper question is whether the Scriptures provide a model of leadership other than servant leadership or that builds beyond this model of leadership.

Conclusion

There are many models that have built upon the concept of servant leadership as described by Greenleaf (2002). In this research, there is one model that is virtue based developed by Patterson (2003) that will be analyzed in this contemporary context and compared to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The contemporary organizational theory and the examination of Scripture will be brought together in looking for the nuancing, confirming, critiquing, or challenging of this theory. The purpose is to build a biblical construct for leadership using the foundation of servant leadership but moving beyond these concepts to embrace other words and concepts or principles for leadership.

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