# 2

# Servant Leadership in Context

Servant leadership has been developed and applied in the midst of a very hot economic climate and in the context of an abundance of new leadership research in general. As a result, there are many new ideas to which to compare it for developing the fine nuances of the theory. However, the negative side is that it gets confused with other theories with some similarities.

## In the Context of Leadership Theory

There has been an explosion of research and development in the area of leadership theory from the end of the twentieth century which has intensified with the coming of the twenty-first century. Servant leadership is one of several new and developing theories of leadership beginning with transformational leadership theory but then moving to more current theories like authentic and adaptive theories. Each of these theories has its own distinction, and yet there are a few connections with servant leadership. Especially in the context of transformational leadership, there is some confusion as to the differences between these growing theories. However, in studying the connection between transformational and servant leadership, there can be some further nuances developed in the understanding

and applying of servant leadership. Transformational leadership is a theory that has been developed and refined through research in many large universities. Servant leadership has been researched and applied in different context even in diverse cultural settings. The distinction between the two can be seen in the particular focus of each theory. Possibly, their similarities are due to their attempt to develop people-oriented leadership styles, but their differences are found in the focus of the leader (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2003). He goes on to declare that they both show concern for followers but transformational leaders engage the followers for the organization and servant leaders focus on service to the followers.

This difference can be seen most clearly in the area of vision. Both theories discuss the need for vision. Transformational leaders develop an inspiring vision that captivates and motivates all in the organization, while servant leaders have a vision for the follower and fulfillment for the individual. The focus is different; the process is different though there are some similarities. However, servant leadership focuses on virtues like humility and altruism whereas transformational leadership focuses on inspiration and transformation for the organization and the followers but for the purpose of the mission. In servant leadership, the organization and mission is a focus as a secondary issue as it proceeds from serving others. There is a clear difference, but the question is whether servant leadership can work when the focus is not initially on the organization.

## In the Context of Followers

Servant leadership has a clear focus on followers and one of the issues of servant leadership is in producing more servant leaders. However, the question is whether this kind of leadership will produce servant followers or if servant followers are part of the equation in developing a servant culture in an organization. Greenleaf (2002) discusses followership as a responsible role in the organization in that the follower must take the risk to empower the leader and to trust his/her insight, which will then be a strength-giving element in the organization. Is being a servant in the context of followers an issue for servant leadership and even leadership development? The premise of servant leadership in its foundation is about the

desire to become a servant. The servant leader is a servant first, it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first then this brings one to aspire to lead (Greenleaf, 2002). In the process of becoming a servant leader, it begins with serving before leading. Then is a servant leader first a servant follower, and does a servant leader produce or encourage others to become not only servant leaders but also servant followers?

Traditionally, the world has been viewed from a leader-centric vantage point but what if followership was put at center stage challenging the concept of leaders as the proactive cause and followers as the reactive effect (Kelley, 2008). Followership can become the issue when viewed from the perspective of the follower. Followers make up the majority of an organization and can have an impact on the way the leader leads as well as the way the organization moves into the future. There are different kinds or styles of followers from the passive to the yes people to the alienated or negative ones, then there are the pragmatics who just go with the winds of what is in vogue, and finally there are the star followers who think for themselves but are active and positive (Kelley, 2008). These different types of followers can be found in many different kinds of organizations. However, the question is whether these followers are like this innately or have they been formed by certain leaders or leadership styles, where is the cause and effect here. Or the bigger question is whether there is cause and effect in this relationship? The bigger question is if people are responsible for how they follow and can the followership style be changed?

This is a concept that can be found in Scripture as well. In reality, this was a major issue in the Protestant Reformation in the teaching of Martin Luther. One of the major pillars of the Reformation was called the priesthood of all believers. The clergy-centric model of the middle ages in the church developed a deep dependency for what was called the laity (translated followers) upon the clergy (translated leaders). This dependency meant that the followers had to depend upon the leaders for every aspect of salvation. Inevitably, this gave great amounts of control to the leaders over the everyday lives of the followers. Martin Luther came along and said that every person was a priest. In other words, everyone could connect to God individually and even help others in walking with the Lord. This revolutionized the church and even society.

Nevertheless, this concept did not go very deep into the culture of the new church and it was not long before the church returned to its leader-centric habits.

What does the Scripture have to say on this issue? This is directly addressed in Ephesians 4:11–16. In this pericope, it is the Lord who gives gifts to individuals to lead as apostles, prophets, evangelist, pastors, or teachers. However, they were to use these gifts of leadership in a very specific way. It was to equip and train others or the followers to do the work of serving others and building the community until all, leaders and followers, can become unified, mature, and growing up by building each other up in love. The job of the leader is to focus on and develop the follower to the point that the follower is a powerhouse of service, growth, and maturity then together they bring growth to others in love. Too many churches hinder themselves when they think that the leaders are the point of the church. The leaders are not the point; they are the servants. The church is the bride of Christ not the leaders. The leaders are the bridesmaids to prepare the bride. Church leaders many times miss this point of leadership in the church in that it is really about the followers and the followers are the one who make it work. Many times church are not working well in the present context and many think it is the culture that is the hindrance when in reality it is the result of not hearing the Scripture on this issue of leadership and followership. Could this be true in the business world as well? Principles in Scripture are universal and apply whether they are believed or not believed. In this case, it is a concept that is largely ignored but it could be a catalyst for new concepts for organizations and churches that could lead to new eras of growth. What if every church and organization had new passionate advocates in the hundreds and thousands? This would change everything including leadership.

Winston (2003) proposed a model of followership related to servant leadership wherein the virtues model of servant leadership in service to followers created a replica of this virtue model for followers beginning with love and producing the same virtues with the end of service to the leader. This model is intriguing in both its theory and the practical implications. The implication here is that servant leadership produces servant followers. Is it possible as well that servant followers could produce servant leaders? Is there cause and effect here but can it flow both ways in

causation? This is an important question but at the very least it implies a servant followership that is different than a general followership in an organization. Servant leadership can produce a servant culture as seen in the application of servant leadership in places like Southwest Airlines. This culture and intentional training produces more servant leaders. Nevertheless, it would be a worthwhile endeavor to produce servant followers and a servant followership culture. To produce this culture, it would take more than classes on servant leadership and followership. Winston (2003) proposes that maturity of the individual is a moderating variable that can increase the intensity of this response of the servant followers to the servant leaders. This is a biblical issue in that maturity is part of the goal of the Christian life as seen in the text from Ephesians 4. The purpose of leaders and followers is to come to maturity in Christ, in essence to grow up, and this maturity in Christ brings maturity in other areas as well, such as in godly character. These concepts of maturity are linked together.

Servant followership is an important issue in servant leadership in several ways. One is that servant leaders can produce servant followers producing a cycle of love and serving with maturity as part of the growth process. Two is that even servant leaders need to come back to the foundation that is about the followers and equipping them and three is that servant followers could possibly even help to produce servant leaders. Biblically, followers are the issue not the by-product of ministry. As servant leaders focus on followers not just in producing servant leaders but also in producing servant followers, this process of personal and organizational growth can be greatly enhanced.

## In the Context of the Business World

Servant leadership has been applied and researched in the business world in both for profit and nonprofit sectors as well. Greenleaf began to do his research in AT&T in the clearly for profit business world. However, it is not just here but also in government and military sectors that this model has been applied with good results. Greenleaf (2002) described servant leadership as beginning with the natural desire to serve and then he

applied and discussed it in the context of the business world as well as the education and even the church world. The classic example and the oft-repeated one is of Southwest Airlines where the concept of servant leadership begins with the CEO but then it is part of the culture of the organization as well. Southwest Airlines has long been known for setting and achieving incredible record of performance as an organization though many have doubted their ability to keep this model of leadership as they grow, but they have done so while increasing to 35,000 employees (McGee-Cooper & Trammel, 2010). This is but one example. Laub (2010) says that many organizations have taken up the banner of servant leadership, which is the understanding and practice of leadership placing the good of the follower over the self-interest of the leader. These organizations are varied and diverse yet they promote, train, and model servant leadership that fits into the broad definition of servant leadership.

There are businesses that are not serving well but much of the problem is in the attitudes, concepts, and expectations regarding business held by society, however; work exists for the person to provide meaningful work as it provides services or products and thereby the business becomes a serving institution (Greenleaf, 2002). Businesses then can be led by servant leaders who provide vision for the organization, but they do so by helping the followers fulfill their own personal call and purpose in the mission of the organization. It has to do with organizational fit and individual calling. Servant leaders help individuals find their personal call in life which is related to their talents, gifts, even their personalities, and inclinations. With this fit between person and mission or business, the followers are served in deeply personal ways that impact their motivation, presence, and even their joy in life. Organizations, even profit organizations can be led by servant leaders who provide service to followers, peers, partners in the business world, customers, and society at large.

Servant leaders develop organizations that are in the business of growing people who become stronger, healthier, more self-reliant, competent, and autonomous while also making and selling at a profit things that people want to buy to be able to pay for the business (Greenleaf, 2002). This is a change in focus. It is a change in attitude, and it is catching on in more and more organizations. TDI is one of the earliest businesses to adopt servant leadership and this heating and plumbing business has been using

servant leadership with required servant leadership training since the 1970s (Spears, 1998). Melrose (1995) as the CEO of the Toro Company implemented servant leadership in 1981 producing a book on his journey to leading by serving. There are several instruments that have been established for measuring servant leadership such as the OLA, and these have been used to measure servant leadership and its impact in several companies in the automotive industry and in addition this instrument has been used in health care, law enforcement, and manufacturing contexts (Laub, 2010). There were servant leader-led organizations in these studies which then compared issues like job satisfaction and absenteeism finding these servant organizations made a significant positive difference in these areas (Laub, 2010). There are a growing number of businesses that have adopted servant leadership and have developed programs for developing servant leaders as a model for leadership for the business. Businesses are finding good results with servant leadership with some having used this model for over 25 years like TDI. This trend has continued into the twenty-first century with several instruments developed for measuring, reporting, and developing servant leadership in organizations. Many of these organizations that are using these instruments for improvement are profit businesses. Servant leadership has found its place in the business world in spite of society's perception of the world of business. Possibly, as more search out this way of leading there will be more to come.

## In the Context of the Church World

Of course, one area where servant leadership seems to fit well is in the context of the church and Christian ministry. Nevertheless, it is apparent that church leaders are often autocratic rather than servant leaders. This is an area of concern especially in the context of growing research for the effectiveness of servant leadership. So, this area needs further development in its connection with Jesus and His teachings since He is the ultimate leader in the church. Jesus was the first to endorse serving as leading in Mark 10. However, this also raises the question of whether Jesus taught servant leadership or transformational leadership or another model of leadership. This question will be more fully addressed in Chap. 5 on Jesus' teaching and model of leadership.

Much of the time the church follows culture in forms, styles, and in leadership. The Bible gives us instruction in many areas where the church can lead the culture or at least use some of the grace provided by God to provide a different model. This is particularly true in the area of leadership. Leadership is an arena that God has provided insight since the beginning of humanity. Christian leadership through the centuries has followed many different models of leadership and presently follows either contemporary models or a model that says teaching theology is enough for leadership. It is important that the church begin to embrace some of these insights and models for leadership. There is a need for a new pattern of leadership. Is this model found in biblical servant leadership or is it a related form of leadership and how do we bring this into the church in the midst of a troubled culture filled with distorted self-issues?

Churches are needed to serve the large number of people who need help for healing and wholeness however; the churches do not seem to be serving well, but if the leaders can become servant leaders, the churches can be exemplars for other organizations (Greenleaf, 2002). He is not the only one that is concerned about the state of the churches and their position in society at large. A particular type of leadership is needed then for churches. An important aspect of churches is their relevance to the culture, but can this relevance to the culture be held in proper tension with the biblical foundation needed for ministry and leadership? The modern growing churches employ insights from the behavioral sciences for evangelism and these churches have been deeply impacted by modernity (Guinness, 1993). These aspects of church leadership make them culturally relevant to Western society. However, the endless pursuit of relevance leads only to transience and burnout. The church needs an effective way of leading that is relevant yet transcultural and transgenerational. We need these kind of leaders and concepts of leadership in churches wherein the churches serve well the people of the communities. The sociology of religion literature suggests that there are important insights to be gained by applying institutional theories to religious organizations and religious scholars concerned with organizations have identified the location of authority and the system of governance as some of the most common dimensions of religious organizations (Packard, 2008). There are concepts and principles that the church can learn from

organizational leadership theory. However, this is not the only source for the church and the church leaders must use these concepts with wisdom and insights that are uniquely part of the foundation of the church and its mission. Some of the principles important for church growth according to some in the church growth/mega church movement are pastoral leadership effectiveness (Wagner, 1985), leadership and transitions (Fletcher, 2006), and developing several key characteristics including empowering leadership (Schwarz, 1996). What is this empowering leadership? Is it servant leadership? At the very least, servant leadership in concept was endorsed by Jesus as a path to greatness in leading.

It is not only the church that can benefit from servant leadership it is also the nonprofit ministries of all different types and sizes. By their very nature, these organizations exist for a purpose other than the profit motive. Part of the drive behind these organizations is their mission. The mission in this nonprofit world can vary, and even the ministries affiliated with the Christian movement can vary in scope and mission. Yet, they all are motivated by a purpose that is a higher purpose and not a self-focused purpose; otherwise they would not be nonprofit organizations. This then is a fertile ground for servant leadership. The institution that becomes distinguished in the contemporary world will have learned to act in a serving way with great economy of resources, both human and material, while being guided by purpose on the path to a better society (Greenleaf, 2002). This better society can begin with effective leaders becoming servant leaders committed to the growth of people beginning with those in the organization. This can then be applied to helps agencies, mission agencies, church development agencies, and other organizations that have been founded to help others around them in society.

## In the Global Context

The question arises as to whether this way of leading can be applied in global contexts. In high authoritarian cultures, the very word "servant" is a problem. There are some areas of the world where it is an insult to be considered a servant in any form. In addition, there are those who have been forced into servanthood or slavery and in this context servant

leadership could be and is resisted. So, this asks the question of whether this model can be applied cross-culturally in some of these areas where there are deep cultural resistances to the concept of servant. This model has been researched and tested in some of these contexts with good results but it takes large amounts of explanation for the theory and its application. We must look for a way ahead for this issue since the principles appear to be universal.

The study of servant leadership has moved from theory to model development to empirical research but most of this has been done in North America and Europe however; newer studies have found servant leadership acceptance and endorsement of servant leadership concepts in Africa and Latin America with some acceptance among pastors in Asia (Irving, 2010). This is just a beginning but more research is being done to be able to bring this model into diverse cultural contexts. Serrano (2006) found that in Panama this theory was not only accepted it was also practiced throughout the culture. Though this is understood to be a Western model, it is growing around the world today with studies in Latin America and China showing servant leadership from these cultural perspectives (Ertel, 2017). Global leadership is an important issue today in our newly connected global society and servant leadership is beginning to show up in many non-Western locations. Concepts of servant leadership have been identified in at least one major worldview on every continent and most worldviews give a high place to the role of servant (Ertel, 2017). There is more work to be done in the global aspect of servant leadership. Nevertheless, there is growing evidence that at the very least there is an understanding and acceptance of the concepts of servant leadership in various cultural contexts with some evidence of the practice of this model of leadership.

## Conclusion

Servant leadership is currently being adopted, researched, developed, and explored in many contexts across cultural and organizational lines. Some have been using and developing servant leadership for more than 25 years, while others have just begun to explore the concept. In addition, servant

followership is a concept that needs further development in both research and practice. However, the enactment of servant leadership must take on culturally contingent characteristics to be effective and to follow the heart of the model in being follower focused and servant oriented (Irving, 2010). So, in some areas of the world it needs to be adapted to the language of the people in ways that are congruent but not exactly the same in terminology. This is called dynamic equivalence. It is looking for the same overall concept while adjusting the language so it is heard by the listener. It is similar in many ways to language translation. In translating from one language to another, the goal is understanding more than word for word exactness. Since languages are formed differently and the concepts are carried in different ways, adjustments must be made for effective understanding. The best theory of translation is one that remains faithful to both the original and receptor languages but when something has to "give" it is in favor of the receptor language without losing the original meaning, this is functional or dynamic equivalence (Fee & Stuart, 2014). An example would be calling Jesus the bread of Life when speaking to Eskimos. Early on they did not use bread and this would be difficult for them to understand. Another example is that among one Brazilian tribe they had no word for leader so an equivalent was found with some explanation. One possible word to be used in other cultures would be that of "steward" and though it is an old word it is a biblical word for the "lead servant." This adaptation can take place through careful analysis and research of the cultures and servant leadership. Servant leadership has found its place in the worlds of business, church, and across cultures as well as in other contexts. Nevertheless, it needs continued development, research, and application to different contexts. This is a call for more work and even more nuanced work on this model of leadership in the areas of research, development, and expansion.

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