

The Importance of Servant Leadership in Schools

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Abstract

*This paper examines the servant leadership model, including the qualities exhibited by servant leaders. It also describes the impact principals can have upon stakeholders in the educational system through servant leadership. Rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy and Biblical history, servant leadership was resurrected in the 1970s when it was re-popularized by Robert Greenleaf. Greenleaf's coined the phrase servant leader in *The Servant as Leader*. Recent research on servant leadership has demonstrated the importance of the model on school climate, student achievement, job satisfaction, and teacher retention—all critical in today's educational system. The benefits of servant leadership applies to a wide array of organizational units, especially schools. Starbucks, Whole Foods Market, Men's Wearhouse, and Nordstroms are examples of companies that practice servant leadership (*Modern Servant Leader*, 2015). It is clear that organizations, especially schools, can become stronger when leaders adopt, practice, and model servant leadership.*

Key Words: Servant, leadership, healing, climate, nurturing, supportive, love

The leadership model referred to as 'servant leadership' was first defined in the seventies by Robert Greenleaf. Servant leadership may eventually come to be recognized as the preferred leadership model of today (Stramba, 2003, p. 103). To be a servant leader, one must put aside the traditionally authoritative style and approach leadership as a servant first. Servant leaders build strength in an organization by encouraging "collaboration, trust, foresight, listening, and the ethical use of power and empowerment" (Stramba, 2003, p. 104).

The idea of servant leadership is not a new one. The ancient Chinese poet and philosopher Lao-Tzu often spoke about servant leadership. In the 5th century, he wrote: "If you want to govern the people, you must speak to them humbly. If you want to lead the people, you must learn how to follow them" (as cited in Teo, 2015). Lao-Tzu's idea of a leader was one who served the needs of others first, strengthening their abilities and giving credit to others: "The best leaders are those their people hardly know exist...The best leaders value their words, and use them sparingly. When they have accomplished their task, the people say, "Amazing! We did it, all by ourselves!" (as cited in Teo, 2015). Another oft referenced philosopher and proponent of servant leadership was Jesus of Nazareth, the central figure of Christianity who many believe is the Son of God. In the Gospel according to John, Jesus very humbly washed the feet of his disciples; although he was clearly the leader they eagerly followed, Jesus demonstrated his servant's heart by performing this lowly act (John 13: 1-17, New International Version). There are many other examples throughout the Bible of Jesus' belief in the leader as a servant of others. Take, for example, the following quote from the Gospel of Mark: "Jesus sat down, called the twelve disciples, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and be the servant of all'", (Mark 9:35, New International Version). It is clear from Jesus' teachings that he believed the way of a great leader is to be but a humble servant.

In much more recent times, Robert K. Greenleaf wrote about the concept of servant leadership in his essay *The Servant as Leader*, first published in 1970. He wrote that a servant leader is a servant first, whereas many people focus on being a leader first, driven by a need for power or possession of material goods (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, n.d.). Greenleaf's interpretation of a servant leader is an individual who "shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible" (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, n.d.). In an attempt to further explain the leadership style of the servant leader, Larry C. Spears, the former president of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership identified the following ten characteristics of servant leaders: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2010, pp. 27-29).

Spears (2010) suggests that leaders who aspire to be servants first must focus on listening to others. Although leaders tend to be admired for great communication and decision-making skills, Spears remarks that true servant leaders must make "a deep commitment to listening intently to others" (p. 27). Servant leaders have learned to listen to what others are saying, but have also mastered the art of hearing what is left unsaid, (Spears, 2010, p. 27). Additionally, Spears suggests that servant leaders are closely tuned in to their own inner voice, and that periods of reflection are necessary in order to hear this voice and grow as leaders.

Another quality servant leaders have mastered is the ability to empathize with others. Servant leaders are able to imagine what it is like to be in another person's situation, and strive to understand and appreciate where someone is coming from, even when their perspective is different. To be filled with empathy is to recognize that all individuals have "special and unique spirits" (Spears, 2010, p. 27), and to value these differences. Spears (2010) mentions that servant leaders assume the intentions of others are good, even when faced with circumstances or behaviors that may be less than desirable. It is this positivity and respectful acceptance of others that servant leaders try to emulate.

The capacity for healing is another characteristic that marks a true servant leader. All people have emotional aches, and many individuals have what Spears refers to as "broken spirits" (Spears, 2010, p. 27). The servant leader, however, recognizes that these struggles are a part of life, and endeavors to help heal those they interact with. In addition to healing others, the servant leader recognizes when a relationship needs to be healed, or even when the servant leader himself needs healing. In this leadership style, the leader focuses on how she can help others as well as herself and all relationships, rather than solely fixing on the organization's needs or the needs of the leader.

According to Spears (2010), awareness—both generally and of one's self—"strengthens the servant leader" and "helps one in understanding issues involving ethics, power, and values" (p. 27). Another way to think about the importance of awareness as a leader is to consider the idea that being self-aware is the ability to look inward, consider one's own emotions and behaviors, and think carefully about how they may affect others (Mind Tools, 2015, para. 18). Being self-aware requires that leaders acknowledge their own weaknesses—as well as their strengths (Mind Tools, 2015, para. 19).

The power of persuasion is another important tool in the toolbox of a servant leader. Rather than expecting compliance from subordinates simply by virtue of a position at the top, servant leaders seek to persuade others in order to build consensus (Spears, 2010, p. 28). It is critical to point out that a servant leader tries to persuade everyone to support decisions, but without manipulation, taking advantage of others, or damaging relationships (Mind Tools, 2015, para. 21). Since persuasion is such a powerful tool, servant leaders must also build what is referred to as 'expert power'. Expert power is the influence that comes from the perception that a leader is an expert in a specific area. Plainly put, "when people perceive you as an expert, they are more likely to listen to you when you want to persuade or inspire them" (Mind Tools, 2015, para. 21).

The next two qualities of servant leaders, conceptualization and foresight, are closely related to one another. The gift for conceptualizing refers to the ability of servant leaders to think beyond the simple day-to-day operations and truly consider the bigger picture within an organization. Spears (2010) refers to conceptualization as the occasions when servant leaders "seek to nurture their abilities to dream great dreams" (p. 28). These leaders are often referred to as visionaries because of their great talent for conceptualizing the future, rather than being "consumed by the need to achieve short-term operational goals" (Spears, 2010, p. 28). Foresight is connected to conceptualization in that leaders who display foresight have thought through the possible outcomes of a scenario and identified the most likely to occur.

These leaders have learned from past experiences, but also ponder the most current realities as well as the potential consequences of the decision in the future (Spears, 2010, p. 28). They make the best decisions possible based on all available information and on imagining what may be.

Stewardship, according to Mind Tools (2015), is all about taking responsibility for the actions of the organization and the role that others play (para. 27). In short, servant leaders who practice good stewardship have learned the value of taking all of the blame, but none of the credit. These leaders understand they have a responsibility for the things that happen inside the organization, and they have identified very clearly what they will and will not stand for. These leaders lead by example, and are not afraid to push back when others demonstrate behaviors that don't align with the values of the organization (Mind Tools, 2015, para. 28).

Another important characteristic of servant leaders is their commitment to the growth of people. In education, this growth may typically take the form of required professional development, but servant leaders are also aware of personal goals, and attempt to present opportunities for employees to achieve these goals (Mind Tools, 2015, para. 30). Spears (2010) states that servant leaders understand "people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers" (p. 29). They are not solely focused on what people can achieve for the leader or the organization, but rather, attentive to how people can first nurture their own personal and professional goals, thereby adding more value to the organization in the long run. During his principalship at the oldest elementary school in Fairbanks, Alaska, Hagstrom (1992) decided that the school others described as 'worn out and unwanted' would grow if he could encourage innovation by nurturing the growth of others: "I was convinced that if a leader of an institution helped others understand their own leadership abilities, that institution would become healthier and stronger" (p. 23). The quality Hagstrom described so clearly is what commitment to the growth of others is all about.

The final quality that servant leaders tend to exhibit is the desire to build a sense of community within the organization. Spears (2010) suggests that in recent years, the movement away from smaller companies and towards larger corporations has caused a disconnect between employees and the organizations to which they belong (p. 29). A servant leader, however, is abundantly aware of the importance of a person's sense of loyalty and belonging within a group, and aspires to provide opportunities for people to share in meaningful experiences across the organization. Mind Tools (2015) suggests organizing social events such as a team lunch, or dedicating the first few minutes of meetings to encouraging informal conversations in order to build camaraderie (para. 32). Regardless of how the sense of community is built, servant leaders ensure that each individual knows how they contribute to the overall success of the organization. Even with these suggestions in mind, Tate (2003) advises against setting up social gatherings and expecting to automatically create a sense of community: "monitoring the social climate within the organizational structure is but one facet of this process; truly "serving" employees requires a commitment by leaders to develop a process that makes it safe for employees to honestly communicate" (p. 38).

As important as it is for one to understand the background of servant leadership and the qualities exhibited by servant leaders, it is significantly more crucial that one understands why this type of leadership is so beneficial for an organization. It is quite obvious that a positive school climate will lead to higher student achievement than a negative one, and research has indicated repeatedly that schools that emphasize a servant leadership mindset tend to have a more positive school climate than those that do not. In one 2010 study, researchers conducted an analysis of the correlation between servant leadership and school climate. In this study, Black (2010) utilized the Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA) to measure the degree of servant leadership at 37 elementary schools in an Ontario English Catholic School Board (p. 450). From these 37 schools, 375 out of the 998 full-time teachers were randomly selected to participate in the study, and 246 actually participated (Black, 2010, p. 450). These participants responded to the OLA, which consisted of 66 survey questions with possible responses consisting of scores from zero through four. Questions on the survey included items such as "I feel appreciated by my principal for what I contribute" and "the principal uses persuasion to influence others instead of coercion or force" (Black, 2010, p. 448). On this scale, a zero indicated no response or an undecided response, a one indicated that the respondent strongly disagreed, a two indicated disagreement, a three indicated agreement, and a four indicated that the respondent strongly agreed (Black, 2010, p. 447). Based on the respondent's scores, each school was given an organizational health rating: toxic, poor, limited, moderate, excellent, or optimal.

The health rating was directly indicative of specific servant leadership characteristics, with a toxic organization showing an absence of servant leadership characteristics and an optimal organization demonstrating servant mindedness (Black, 2010, p. 453). After conducting a correlational analysis, Black (2010) found there to be “a significant positive relationship between the perceptions of servant leadership practices and perceptions of school climate” (p. 454). Furthermore, Black’s analysis determined that the strongest connection between servant leadership and school climate was exhibited when leaders demonstrated qualities of ‘supportive’ and ‘values people’ (Black, 2010, p. 454). In concluding her analysis, Black stated “the strength of the association between the servant leadership traits and a positive school climate suggest that principals who wish to improve their school climate should follow the model of servant leadership” (p. 454).

Since the research clearly supports the benefits of servant leadership in an educational setting, the question then becomes: how does a principal begin to foster this type of climate among all educators? The simplest answer is the best one. A principal leads by example; therefore, by actively demonstrating and teaching the characteristics of a servant leader, the principal can enact change within a school. Often, this desire for change comes about because a new administrator has come into a situation where the school climate is negative, stifling student achievement and crippling the sense of community in the building. Herman and Marlowe (2005) caution that trying to change the status quo in a school can be difficult. “Simply explaining to teachers that it is their role to empathize with and consider a child’s feelings is one thing, but attempting to train the skills needed to attain this degree of insight and awareness is another thing altogether” (p. 176-177). In order for teachers to adopt the mindset of servant leaders, they must truly believe that all humans deserve to be treated with kindness (Herman & Marlowe, 2005, p. 177). Although this seems to be a simple principle readily accepted and easily brought into action, it may not be as uncomplicated as one might think. More specifically, teacher and author Torey Hayden discusses teaching at risk youth, as well as emotionally disturbed children: “I find myself operating from a place that acknowledges everyone matters, no matter how different, how unappealing, or even, how evil...” (as cited in Herman & Marlowe, 2005, p. 177).

The key, according to van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) is to lead with love (p. 122). At first a seemingly trite recommendation, these authors explain their proposal by contrasting it with the idea of those who lead by fear, noting that many organizations lead by fear, which they rationalize must be a good idea because it works. In reality, however, leading by fear is unproductive—and perhaps, even likely to be *destructive* to an organization. The consequences of leading by fear can include “the loss of the best people along with the knowledge they take with them, the lack of allowing employees to perform at optimal levels, and the dreaded avoidance that will occur as employees feel disconnected” (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015, p. 123). Additionally, any organization founded on the premise of compliance through fear will surely suppress innovation and creativity, since there can be no opportunity for growth or risk taking in this kind of environment (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015, p. 123).

In addition to a positive school climate which will support greater student achievement, research has shown there to be a significant positive correlation between teachers’ job satisfaction and the degree to which they perceive their principals exhibit the qualities of servant leaders (Shaw & Newton, 2014, p. 104). In one study, 69% of the variability in job satisfaction was attributed to perceptions of a principal’s servant leadership qualities (Shaw & Newton, 2014, p. 104). In the same study, the same strong positive correlation was also found when examining teacher retention: teachers who indicated that their principals exhibited the qualities of servant leaders were more likely to also indicate their intention to remain at their current school (Shaw & Newton, 2014, p. 104).

These findings are incredibly important for schools, districts, and states. As Shaw and Newton (2014) explain, many states spend the majority of their state revenue on education, and “the funds poured into training teachers are precious and difficult to obtain” (p. 105). To continuously spend funds on recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers can be exhaustive to many already-stretched budgets. It is worth considering, then, that a servant leadership approach may be beneficial in more ways than one may have originally thought. As Shaw and Newton (2014) so clearly pointed out, states can continue to spend money on recruiting and training teachers and pass every kind of law requiring high quality instruction, but without servant leaders in the schools who can create and maintain a positive school climate and inspire greatness in others, the effort may very well be all for nothing (p. 106).

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