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Examining the Application of Servant Leader Theory

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Abstract

When Robert Greenleaf introduced the servant leader theory in the 1970s, he provided a vague definition that inspired decades of development by scholars and practitioners alike. Servant leader theory prioritizes fulfilling individuals' needs, which maximizes their potential and increases performance. Researchers have further refined Greenleaf's theory, and by doing so, a set of key servant leader attributes has been established. While this has been an important contribution to Greenleaf's work, translating theory into practice and defining why it is effective have been areas that remain unanswered. Case studies regarding servant leader theory tend to focus on upper echelons of organizational hierarchies only, and provide little evidence why the theory is effective. Furthermore, there is little or no discussion regarding the application of servant leader theory within the military, or any organization with such a formal hierarchal structure. A literature analysis revealed gaps in information, and this study is intended to highlight how servant leader theory translates to improving organizational performance, and why it is effective.

Examining the Application of Servant Leader Theory

Robert Greenleaf's servant leader theory is not a new concept, but it is relatively under-examined compared to other leadership theories. Over the years, scholars have defined what servant leadership is, as well as key attributes that a servant leader displays, but finding exactly how and why servant leader theory works tends to be a challenge. This study is intended to highlight how servant leader theory translates to maximizing organizational performance, and why it is effective. It may additionally serve as a foundation as to why servant leader theory is a valuable component of one's overall leadership style to bridge generation gaps in the modern era. It also highlights an opportunity for future research focused specifically on organizations

like the military that are experiencing generation gap challenges (Humbard, n.d.). Ultimately, this study's focus lies in the following question:

Does current literature support how servant leader theory translates into improving organizational performance, or why it is effective?

Answering this research question will contribute to the study of servant leader theory by defining not the traits or attributes that servant leaders embody, but by exploring and defining servant leadership as a universal practice that can be applied to all levels of leadership within organizational structures. Furthermore, correlating Greenleaf's servant leader theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a definitive link to *why* servant leader practice is effective. In fact, the intended second or third order effect of such a universal application of servant leadership and why it is effective is intended to be a means to unify organizational efforts from the bottom up. Doing so will change the workplace paradigm. It will allow for interaction between all levels of organizational leadership that would ordinarily appear to be micromanagement under conventional hierarchy and common leader theory practices (Delgado, Strauss & Ortega, 2015).

Background

During this researcher's 22 years of service in active duty military, a wide range of leadership theory has been explored and absorbed into a personal leadership style. The same can be said of the majority of individuals at this point in military careers, and those in the corporate world as well. In recent years, servant leader theory has become popular in certain military communities, but there seems to be a lack of a definite model how to employ it inside or outside military organizations that require contractual service obligations. Questions arise regarding how to apply servant leader theory, or why it might be effective. Meanwhile, a parallel effort has

been focused toward bridging the perceived gap between senior leaders, or, Generation X(born between 1965-1980) leading Millennial-aged members(born between 1981-1996) in the military, and this applies to all occupations in general (Humbard, n.d.). Upon researching Greenleaf's servant leader theory, it became clear that some areas are yet to be explored, and the theory itself may be a key to achieving organizational excellence by attaining Maslow's highest order need of self-actualization, which provides the common ground senior leaders in every vocation need to develop Millennial members for the future.

Literature Review

First introduced in a 1970 essay, Robert Greenleaf's servant leader theory has been the subject of interest and inspiration for leaders and researchers alike. In 1977, he would go on to elaborate on servant leadership by offering this broad definition, which has left considerable room for interpretation: "The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant—first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. 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 they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13).

Common Thread in the Literature

Regardless of its vague foundation, researchers have elaborated on servant leader theory's defining traits. The first to do so was J.W. Graham (1991), who identified humility, relational power, autonomy, moral development of followers, and emulation of leaders' service orientation as characteristics of servant leadership. Then, Larry Spears (1995) made a significant contribution when he distilled Greenleaf's theory down into ten attributes (which he stated was

not all-inclusive), which were: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Further researchers such as Boone & Makhani (2012) would go on to discuss skills, behaviors, and attitudes associated with servant leader practice, noting that skills and behaviors can be taught and improved upon while attitudes are rooted in an internal emotional basis affecting one's willingness to apply specific leadership styles. Others, such as Peter Mulinge (2018) focus on a specific attribute like humility within a case study of servant leadership on former president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere. Conversely, instead of a singular case study, Focht (2015) performed a Delphi study among leading researchers and academics to define the 12 primary characteristics of servant leadership which were determined to be valuing people, humility, listening, trust, caring, integrity, service, empowering, serving others' needs before their own, collaboration, love/unconditional love, and learning. Overall, the consistent thread throughout the current literature relates directly to the characteristics and attributes of what servant leader theory is, but there is a notable lack of evidence describing how servant leader theory translates into improving organizational performance, or why it is effective. There is, however, a strong case that the servant leader theory is a stand-alone concept, which is why there should be discussion as to *how* and *why* it is effective.

Servant leader theory is accepted as standing apart from other more traditional leadership practices. Coetzer, Bussin & Geldenhuys (2017) defined the stand-alone nature of servant leader theory and accurately underscored a major aspect of this author's research. In fact, it may be the most relevant contribution covered in this review. According to Coetzer et al, "Different servant leadership measures have been validated to date and a clear distinction has been made between the theory of servant leadership and other leadership theories. However, it seems that research

on the implementation of servant leadership within an organization is still a potential follow up for future study. The main functions of a servant leader are not yet conceptualized in the literature to help researchers or practitioners to implement servant leadership successfully within organizations." (p. 27). As it calls on leaders to act first as servants, some critique servant leader theory as a means by which leaders devalue themselves, but Blanchard (2004) may have summed it up best by saying, "Servant leaders don't think less of themselves, they just think of themselves less."

Potential Gaps or Contradictions

While much of the literature resonates with common themes and threads discussing attributes and characteristics, there are reasons to take another look at those who have attempted to define servant leader theory as originally described in Greenleaf's work during the 1970s. It is also important to identify supporting theoretical information, or lack thereof, that explains *why* servant leader theory is effective. For example, amidst the significant contributions he made upon Greenleaf's foundation, Spears (2010) stated "…foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future" (p. 28). It does not appear Greenleaf discusses foresight in any of the seminal or subsequent works regarding servant leader theory, which invites the question of whether or not Spears is deviating from Greenleaf's original intent?

Then, one source states servant leader theory is not valid at all, as it overlooks the impact of human nature when individuals are placed in leadership roles. Helena Liu (2017) critiqued servant leader theory as it relies on selfless sacrifice to serve others while excluding the influence power and control brings into the equation. While it is an excellent counter-point to the general consensus, her work is limited in scope, as the study is based on one manager in a firm located in

a specific geographic area. A larger study of its kind covering a more diverse demographic field needs to be performed to validate Liu's findings.

During the analysis, gaps appear in the lack of *why* servant leader theory works, and this brings the research into the realm of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Thus, the research leads specifically to Maslow's highest order need of self-actualization. Maslow (1973) eventually went on to expand self-actualization into four needs, namely, cognitive, aesthetic, self-actualization, and self-transcendence, but, for the purposes of this study, however, self-actualization is considered in its basic form; that people are satisfied most when they get to be who and what they truly want to be. The association of theories between Greenleaf and Maslow is not well documented, and it appears to be largely overlooked and under-researched.

To take the discussion a step further, there appears to be a gap regarding the application of servant leader theory in the military and other firms requiring contractual service obligations. It is discussed and written about in military leadership studies, but it is unclear whether military leaders are referencing Greenleaf's original concept, or if military leaders are solely attributing the nature of service to their personal leadership style (Citroen, 2019).

Literature Review Conclusion

Ultimately, despite almost five decades of research and general acceptance as a valid practice, there is relatively little emphasis on the actual application of servant leader theory or why it is effective. There is neither a solid source of published literature beyond attributes or characteristics which define it, nor is there supporting literature on its application except at the highest of organizational hierarchy. Additionally, aside from the gap regarding *why* servant leader theory is effective, established literature appears to overlook generational differences regarding the average young employee of 2019 versus older generations. Concurrently,

according to researcher Dirk van Dierendonck (2011), views on leadership behavior are changing with the times, and there is a demand for more ethical, people-first style of leadership. Ideas and behaviors modeled after servant leader theory may be exactly what organizations need today.

Method

The following questions posed to each source document provided focus to the research: 1.) "Is there a discussion of servant leader theory beyond attributes and characteristics displayed by its practitioners?" and, 2.) "Is there any research supporting why servant leader theory is effective?"

To answer the questions above, a qualitative text analysis of current literature was performed. Literature was examined chronologically, beginning with seminal works and following major contributions over time. Each potential source was screened by applying the focus questions. This identified common themes while exposing gaps to be explored. For example, Coetzer, et al related best to the focus of this study's overall research question, but it did not fulfill the questions being asked above, which indicated a possible gap in available data. The overarching intent of this method was to validate if there is indeed a data gap to be explored and studied, and the following describes the way in which it was carried out.

First, accurately posing the research question set the scope and trajectory for data gathering and analysis. Ultimately, as previously discussed, the research question was refined to read, "Does current literature support how servant leader theory translates into improving organizational performance, or why it is effective?" Using this question as a foundation, it was possible to collect data that defined the origins and evolution of servant leader theory and why it

is effective, which incidentally became a prerequisite for determining if the research question itself was valid in the first place.

Next, different databases such as the university's EBSCO host library and SAGE publications online were utilized in identifying and collecting relevant sources. Combinations of key words pertaining to the application of servant leader theory were run through the databases, while search functions were filtered to include only full-text, peer-reviewed articles originally published in English. Initially, the frame work was to focus on sources 2014 and later, but the limited nature of servant leader theory research relevant to this study necessitated a look all the way back to Greenleaf's original work in the 1970s and follow researchers' contributions as they were made over time. While a great many selections were found from 2014-present, few pertained to answering the research question this work revolves around.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria further filtered the selection of research sources. The decision on whether a source was relevant or not was made based off the article title and/or subject matter discussed in each item's abstract. Generalized sources such as D'Souza & Gurin's (2016) work regarding the universal nature of Maslow's self-actualization, or Melchar and Bosco's (2010) work regarding servant leadership's effect on organizational output were given higher priority, as many articles went down specific lanes that were outside the scope of this study. For example, an excellent study by de Rubio & Kiser (2015) discussed the effect gender and age may have on servant leader practice. Though it was a well-delivered article, it is beyond the scope of this research, so it was excluded. Of the sources deemed relevant, selections for the literature review either tied directly back to Greenleaf's original work, were later revisions of his work, or made significant contributions to defining servant leader theory as it is known today. Finally, this method resulted in looking to other theories as to why servant leader

theory is effective, and this led to considering Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, which opened the aperture of the discussion as well as the results of the study.

Discussion

Coetzer et al (2017) stands as an important part of this research, but there is a limitation in how it describes servant leader theory should be implemented. They discuss "flipping the hierarchy", which places the servant leader at the bottom of the organization, who then pushes the vision and mission up through the ranks and finally places followers on the front line of productivity. While entry-level workers are indeed the front line of the organization, they are inexperienced and untrained to take the lead without significant managerial oversight, which is counterintuitive to productivity. The research in this study indicates the key to elevating entry-level workers to attain their full potential, thus maximizing organizational performance, is though servant leader practitioners fulfilling workers' higher needs. Once these needs are accounted for, in context with Maslow's hierarchy, workers have their full attention and potential available for job performance. Instead of "flipping the hierarchy", servant leaders focus on followers attaining Maslow's self-actualization, and this is what eliminates barriers to working at maximum potential. When followers see leaders who help them meet their needs and achieve their goals, chances are strong that they will exhibit increased productivity, but it goes further in an organization's overall talent management as well.

Aside from experiencing increased productivity, this study infers a connection between employees' senses of fulfillment and job satisfaction, which leads to improved talent retention and commitment to the organization. There is a direct correlation that ties employee satisfaction to their long-term commitment to the organization which limits the negative impact of burnout and turnover rates. One survey of 496 employees indicated that pay and rewards were not

incentives to remain with a company, but social aspects, job characteristics, and work environment were key factors that motivated them to remain committed (Dalkrani & Dimitriadis, 2018). The implied connection lies in servant leadership driving employees' achievement of Maslow's need of self-actualization, which reflects the social aspects, job characteristics, and work environment that positively influence commitment to the organization and contentment which lead to lower instances of burnout and higher retention rates. Naturally, these results pertain to a work force that is free to move from one company to the next if it suits their needs, but what about workers under specific obligations of service like those in the military? High turnover rates, burnout, and generational differences can be sticking points for many such organizations that rely on retaining talented individuals from the youngest generation in the work force and developing them into future leaders in order to survive.

Regarding its effectiveness on employee satisfaction, talent retention, and generational differences, there is evidence to advocate for servant leader theory in the military. "One significant hurdle facing military leaders today is the unique challenge of leading Millennials. According to the 2014 Military Demographics Review (2014), 4 out of 5 active-duty service members were 35 years old or younger, and more than half the active-duty officer corps fell in the millennial bracket." (Humbard, n.d.). Specifically, (but not explicitly) in the case of the military, senior leaders have been challenged to develop Millennial-aged members into leaders of the future. Changing times do not necessarily call for new approaches so much as finding common ground to offset the effects of change, and servant leader theory can be the bridge to tie together these commonalities. For an example, the Special Operations Forces Narrative (2014) reflects millennial ethos as it states, "We are a values-based organization…unconcerned with who gets the credit and recognizing much of what we do will remain in the shadows." This

resonates with how the millennial generation tends to identify with collective identity when Humbard (n.d.) states, "(Millennials) are excellent team players who embrace an all-inclusive operational style. They are group oriented rather than being individualists. They may sacrifice their own identity to be part of the team." These examples found in the literature indicate common ground linking senior leaders and junior followers, and infers rapport that leads to increased organizational performance, but a limitation remains as one is left wondering *how* and *why* it occurs. Again, this study answers the *why* and *how* by associating Greenleaf's servant leader theory as a key to achieving Maslow's hierarchy of needs. As another example of generations finding common ground, the Special Operations Forces Narrative (2014) reflects Millennial ethos as it states, "We are a values-based organization…unconcerned with who gets the credit and recognizing much of what we do will remain in the shadows." This resonates with how the younger generation tends to identify with collective identity when Humbard (n.d.) states, "(Millennials) are excellent team players who embrace an all-inclusive operational style. They are group oriented rather than being individualists. They may sacrifice their own identity to be part of the team." The common ground that is facilitated by servant leader theory applies not only to the military, but to any organization that experiences negative impacts of generational differences as outlined in the study, but the results are not without its limitations.

The major shortcoming of this study is its generalized focus and qualitative nature versus a specific quantitative basis. In other words, this study is theoretical in nature, but soundly rooted in the alignment of well-accepted leadership theories and practice. A further limitation of this study is the subjective nature of measuring organizational performance on a scale large enough to capture definitive results.

Conclusions

Servant leader theory translates into maximized organizational performance and is quite effective because it addresses and meets the needs of others. These needs, in the sense Maslow defines, equate to barriers or decrements of individuals' abilities and bandwidth to perform within their organization because they are preoccupied on a personal level trying to achieve that which they want for themselves. Servant leader theory, which calls for leaders to act as servants first for their people, removes these barriers, and raises followers up so they are able to attain their goals. This is not a matter of leaders devaluing themselves or followers merely being selfish; it is a psychological human nature to strive for self-actualization, and personal needs rarely align with organizational goals (Chernyak-Hai & Tziner, 2016). In the modern era, where the average entry-level American worker has their basic needs met, (Fiorillo, 2019) leaders must inherently focus on meeting their peoples' higher order needs like self-actualization in order to access their full potential. This is absolutely true in the case of military members, whose basic needs are most certainly met. If leaders cannot unlock their peoples' talents and full potential, they are inefficiently utilizing their most precious resource. Knowing this, servant leader theory becomes a key for senior leaders at all levels to bridge the real or perceived gap between them and Millennial-aged followers. Regarding the nature of leaders and followers, followers greatly outnumber leaders in the vast majority of organizations, so it is imperative for leaders to understand different ways to harness the power of the majority. Thus, putting followers' needs first, and ultimately inspiring them to perform to their full potential will have a positive effect on support for the leader, the company, and even the company's vision (Brooks, 2015). By experiencing this, workers know they are valued and recognize leaders who met their needs are worth going the extra mile for when called upon to do so. Finally, research indicates that servant

leaders can develop a culture of followers who are servant leaders themselves, and a cycle of servant leader practice perpetuates itself (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006).

Recommendation for Future Study

There is ample space and need for future research within the corporate and military communities regarding Greenleaf's servant leader theory and Maslow's need to attain self-actualization. Specific advancement can be made if a Delphi study like Focht & Ponton's (2015) research conducted is performed among a specific cadre of 15 military senior enlisted leaders (pay grade E9) throughout a limited community like the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). Such a study, while constrained to a specific focus group, will lead to a holistic consensus of what influential leaders at the strategic level consider to be servant leader practice, which then can be compared and contrasted against Greenleaf's original work to compile a standard by which servant leader theory may be applied. The result will be a theoretically sound approach which accounts for the desired attributes and characteristics the focus group members deemed essential.

Additional study would be beneficial in the area of entry level workers' needs assessment. The assumption in this study, backed by average income statistics (Fiorillo, 2019), is that the average young American worker's basic needs are met, so it is an implied responsibility for leaders to ensure their followers' higher order needs are met. If basic needs are met, leaders must realize they need to affect more than a member's desire for a paycheck; that they yearn to be a part of something bigger than themselves. The changing needs of younger workers highlight a need for examining servant leader theory in this context as well. Future study would require observation of a population before and after servant leader practice is

applied and aimed to affect self-actualization, recording the performance to specific metrics, and compared for data reflecting an increase in organizational output.

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