

Servant Leadership: A Leadership Style Whose Time Has Come

The Challenge to Leadership

A crisis in leadership is brewing worldwide. Nations and organizations are becoming increasingly difficult to lead and manage. The ever changing social, political and economic environment is agitating followers to raise a new set of demands which is posing a serious challenge to traditional forms of leadership.

A case in point is the recent ongoing social uprising that has engulfed the Northern part of Africa and the Middle East. Business organizations too have been facing similar employee upheavals although it may not have been so apparent. In response to the demands from employees, owners have been quietly changing the leadership at the top to preserve employee morale and productivity.

It is not difficult to identify the underlying cause behind these challenges to leadership. It is a combination of many social, political and economic factors. The ongoing economic crisis has added a new dimension to the problem.

A cursory glance at history provides ample examples, which demonstrate how people rose against authority when they saw serious economic disparity and lack of social and political progress. Extremes of wealth and poverty cannot be tolerated for a long time. They inevitably give rise to social upheavals and revolutions.

The solutions leaders are offering to solve this emerging threat have been found inadequate and unsatisfactory by those who are affected. Such leaders rely heavily on knowledge and skill acquired from traditions schools or universities, and unfortunately, the solution they offer does not address the core issues facing followers.

A new set of knowledge and skill designed for the 21st century with the potential to provide lasting solution to the recurring challenges is needed. Followers want to see examples of leadership expressed through demonstrable dedication and commitment. They do not want to see a list of policies and guidelines that do not address the core issues.

Servant Leadership - A Possible Solution

Robert Greenleaf in the United States developed the theory of servant-leadership, which is a comprehensive style of leadership that emanates from moral authority. This leadership philosophy eventually led to the formation of the *Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership*. Robert Greenleaf believed transforming human behavior requires appealing to the higher nature of a person. Servant-leadership derives its sources from the gospel of Mark 10:43 wherein Jesus admonished his disciples when he said, "Whoever wants to be great must become a servant."

Robert Greenleaf presents servant-leadership as a practical philosophy that supports the choice of service first and leadership later. This is contrary to the traditional concept of

leadership that seeks benefit and influence for the leader as its primary goal. Servant-leadership is a way of expanding service to individuals and institutions. Greenleaf popularized servant-leadership when he published his essay, "The Servant as Leader" in 1970. Other thinkers and writers provided additional support and expanded its theories by emphasizing its transformational character that attempts to change the behavior of followers through action rather than words.

A servant-leader may be the answer to the crisis of leadership, which is engulfing the developing world today. If the leaders and potential leaders in developing countries put service before benefits that come with assuming the position of leadership, the result could be quite different. Under that scenario, leadership positions will only attract those who have risen to the challenge and seek authority and responsibility to serve. Such leaders will endure the relative hardship that comes with the lack of adequate compensation for their services and will not succumb to corruption and unethical practices to line their pockets. Their only motive in seeking leadership position will be to serve and not to seek benefits for themselves.

We have many examples of such great leaders who rose to the occasion in a time of crisis to serve their people and not to seek benefit for themselves. Mentioning the following three leaders will illustrate this point.

Examples of Servant Leaders

Nelson Mandela in Africa comes to mind as a towering figure in this regard. Rather than seeking benefits and compromising with the Apartheid regime, Mandela paid a heavy price to bring down the evils of a regime that tried to institutionalize the separate development of the people of one nation. Today, despite its many challenges, South Africa is re-emerging as a leading economic superpower in Africa.

Mahatma Gandhi of India, another towering figure, liberated a sub-continent from the yokes of colonialism through peaceful resistance. India today is a great power and is exercising the full benefits of its independence. It is rapidly accelerating its social, political and economic development.

In the United States, Dr. Martin Luther King is recognized as one of the greatest leaders the country produced. He contributed enormously to the progress of civil liberty and the dismantling of racism in the country. Through a coordinated and well-directed peaceful movement, he brought about an end to institutionalized racism. He leveled the playing field for blacks and other minorities.

Anyone aspiring to be compared to these leaders must arise and demonstrate a leadership style that is comparable to these giants. Exemplary conduct and behavior will not be recognized promptly, and in due course, will bring about the desired transformation in any society.

Principles of Servant Leadership

Servant-leaders follow important principles in their leadership styles. Robert Greenleaf outlines 10 principles in his philosophy that characterize the central ideas of servant-leadership. These principles, outlined here below, constitute the hallmark and core components of servant-leadership.

Servant-leaders are good listeners. The ability to communicate effectively and to make decisions promptly is vital for servant-leaders. They seek to identify the thinking and inclinations of their followers, looking for verbal and nonverbal communication signs and gestures.

Empathy is an important quality of servant-leaders. Even if they reject the performance of their co-workers or followers, they accept and empathize with them. Servant leaders believe that co-workers or followers must be accepted and recognized for their good intentions even when their contributions and performance fail short of the desired level.

Servant-leaders desire to transform and integrate their followers and use healing as a powerful force in the process. They are prepared to heal themselves and others to accomplish this objective whenever they find some shortcoming. They attempt to transform the behaviors of others and to integrate them into the group in a search for wholeness.

Developing awareness, especially self-awareness is an important quality of servant-leaders. Despite the discomfort that awareness brings, servant-leaders endeavor to stay on top of situations. While maintaining their inner security, they do not seek solace. Instead, they are committed to raising their awareness and that of their co-workers and followers.

Persuasion is a key quality of servant-leaders. They are reluctant to use their positional authority when making decisions. They use their persuasion skills to build consensus and include the group in the decision making process. This makes servant-leaders quite distinct from the traditional authoritarian leaders who rely on authority rather than persuasion.

Conceptualizations, the ability to seek, nurture and dream characterizes the leadership qualities of servant-leaders. Instead of limiting their thinking to the day-to-day realities of their responsibility, servant-leaders seek a delicate balance between conceptualization and every day responsibilities. They focus and look at the problems of organizations from the conceptual point of view to give free reign to their imaginations to come up with relevant and practical solutions.

Servant-leaders have great foresight. They envisage the challenges they face from the point of view of the past, the present and the future. They try to understand the lessons of the past, in relation to the realities of the present and consider the likely consequences of the decision in the future. They try to develop an intuitive mind.

Servant-leaders view their responsibilities as that of a steward – one who holds the institution in trust for society. They consider CEOs, staff and directors as trustees or

caretakers. These office holders have a duty and responsibility to live up to the expectation of those who put them in office.

Commitment to the growth of their followers or coworkers is an important characteristic of servant-leaders. They believe that people have intrinsic value that goes beyond the contributions they make at the place of work. Consequently, they are committed to the growth of everyone in the organization.

Servant-leaders understand the importance of building a community. They have a good grasp of the impact that would result by shifting from smaller local institutions or communities to larger ones. Servant-leaders endeavor to seek and identify the various means to build a community for all who work with the institution or organization.

Leaders in developing countries need to learn and adopt the above-mentioned principles in their leadership strategies if they want to be successful. They need to direct and devote their energies and efforts to the service of the country or organizations they lead. The pursuit of title and authority has no place in today's knowledge-driven economy and there is no greater satisfaction for good leaders than serving the needs of their followers. Leadership must be viewed as an end in itself and not as a means to an end.

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