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SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN THE WORKPLACE

Joseph D'Mello

ABSTRACT

Starting from the definition of leadership in general, this work traces servant leadership in particular from its ancient roots to today's business organizations and argues that the lacuna in organizational servant leadership is likely to be addressed by the growing existential and competitive imperative for organizations to undertake agile transformations.

WORKPLACE AND LEADERSHIP

Merriam-Webster (2023) defines the verb “lead” as “to guide on a way especially by going in advance”; “to direct on a course or in a direction”; and “to serve as a channel for.” All three of these variations suggest that a leader envisions a result or destination and then builds motivation and inspiration for getting there. For example, in Martin Luther King’s *I Have a Dream* speech (<https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>), the final destination was a society of fairness, justice, and equality. In the *Our Father* (Mt. 6:9-13), Jesus articulated the desired result as the kingdom of God coming to earth. Both of these leaders did not resort to coercion or glib persuasion in order to inspire others to yearn for the envisioned destination or result. They were able to create a legitimate and compelling aura of authenticity which lit a spark of fervor and conviction that invigorated others to seek the same destination/result, regardless of the obstacles, sacrifices, and tribulations along the way.

History has also had its fair share of motivational and inspirational leaders who envisioned a destination detrimental or destructive to others: Adolf Hitler being one of them. Equating leadership purely with charisma, motivation, or inspiration would result in conferring that distinction upon some individuals who civilized society would consider unworthy of that appellation. The dictionary definition of leadership falls short in this regard because it does not

adequately capture the characteristics of leaders who are worthy of our respect and admiration. What then should be the definition of an estimable leader?

The distinguishing element is that a venerable leader’s destination or result is one that elevates the overall human condition or the human spirit rather than diminishes it. Martin Luther King’s destination elevated the condition of a segment of society that was shackled by the restraints of injustice and discrimination, while not diminishing or harming the condition of those who did not belong to that segment. Likewise, Jesus sought to elevate the human condition with his mission to pave a salvific path to the kingdom of God – a path that was not off limits to anyone.

In this paper, we will define a leader in terms of the dictionary definition, adding the requirement that the destination or result is one that uplifts followers and does not debase non-followers. This implies that a leader is committed to the truth, because falseness and lies eventually hurt or debase someone. Except for minor but relevant excursions, the focus of this paper is on servant leadership in the workplace.

NEED FOR SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN THE WORKPLACE

Servant leadership adds the extra element of selflessness to the traits of leadership: a servant leader in an organizational or corporate setting sublimates personal gain or priorities for the development and greater good of the team or

organization. A servant leader is driven by a morally rooted zeal to serve employees and not the other way around.

While servant leadership gained attention in industry and the workplace in the 1970's (Parris & Peachy, 2013), it is essential to note that it goes back thousands of years. There are allusions to the essence of servant leadership in various cultures and religions. For example, as early as the 5th or 6th century BC, the Chinese philosopher Laozi wrote: "The highest type of ruler is one of whose existence the people are barely aware...The Sage is self-effacing and scanty of words" (Chan, 1963). Various other religions like Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism, to name a few, have implicit references to servant leadership.

It appears that the most direct and explicit early reference to servant leadership is expressed in *Matthew 20:25-28*:

You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

In this passage, Jesus clearly contrasts the style of leadership he is propounding with the style that is prevalent in the zeitgeist of his epoch, in which the notion of a servant leader was non-existent and would even have been considered an utterly outlandish, preposterous, and risible concept. This genre of leadership most likely fell outside the Overton window of his own apostles, disciples, and countrymen, let alone the Roman occupiers.

Servant leadership is touted as a nobler form of leadership that puts team and company before personal gain or ambition. Studies have shown that servant leadership not only makes for greater team performance and employee wellbeing and satisfaction but also adds more meaning and fulfillment to the role and life of a servant leader (Parris & Peachy, 2013). An article in Forbes magazine (Percy, 2020, July 15) links servant leadership to higher company profits and employee morale and identifies seven behavioral dimensions of servant leaders:

...caring for each individual employee when he or she incurs setbacks in their professional or even personal life; displaying conceptual skills; empowering people, providing the employee with latitude to find their own best way to work; behaving ethically and willingly helping the employee to make difficult, values-loaded decisions; putting their employees first; helping employees grow and succeed; and inviting individual followers to create value for the community, even beyond the boundaries of the organization. (Percy, 2020, July 15)

Various other studies can be found which associate servant leadership with positive outcomes in organizations, such as greater employee confidence, motivation, innovation, empowerment, and overall wellbeing. Ken Blanchard and Renee Broadwell identify ten characteristics of servant leaders (2008).

The ilk of leaders upon whom history has bestowed the recognition of servant leadership have been typified by several characteristics: selflessness, envisioning an uplifting destination/result and guiding others to it, self-effacement, empathy, caring, emotional intelligence, and several other noble instincts and behaviors.

"Servant leadership is touted as a nobler form of leadership that puts team and company before personal gain or ambition."

EXTENT OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN THE WORKPLACE

Given the above characteristics of servant leadership, how well do leaders in the workplace measure up against them? There are definitely many leaders in industry who would

come very close. Steve Jobs certainly inspired and energized his Apple team to attain a technology destination that would uplift Apple and society as well. While one can debate the pros and cons of smart phone usage (especially among children), it would be hard to refute the fact that the smart phone has uplifted society by providing a communication experience that ranks in the highest echelons of convenience and quality.

It is likely that several other leaders, executives, and managers in industry exhibit traits and behaviors that resemble servant leadership. Ken Blanchard and Renee Broadwell's book also identifies several servant leaders in industry (2008). However, there are a troublingly high number of indicators that suggest that servant leadership in the workplace is far more the exception than the rule. For example, a recent report on C-suite roles found that "70% of executives say their employees are happy, while just 44% of employees agree" (Doyle, 2022, August). There are a plethora of similar gauges in industry that paint a picture of work environments that are stifling and often downright toxic to employees. For example, a very recent article in Forbes magazine cites a toxic work environment as the #1 factor driving people to resign (Perna, 2022, June 1). Another recent article in the MIT Sloan Review claims that toxic culture is driving the *Great Resignation* (Sull et al., 2022, January 11). An August 2022 CNBC article claims that job unhappiness is at a staggering all-time high: "In the U.S. specifically, 50% of workers reported feeling stressed at their jobs on a daily basis, 41% as being worried, 22% as sad, and 18% angry" (Collins, 2022, August 12). Various reports peg the percentage of US workers who are unhappy enough to want to change jobs in the 40% to 55% range, and this range applies not only in the US but across the globe (De Smet et al., 2022, July 13).

In a 2018 book *Dying for a Paycheck*, Jeffrey Pfeffer from the Stanford Graduate School of Business claims that modern management harms employee health and company performance. In another book, *Leadership BS: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time*, Pfeffer (2015) argues that "much of the oft-repeated wisdom about leadership is based more on hope than reality, on wishes rather than data, on beliefs instead of science" (p. 47). In view of all these findings, it is almost impossible to imagine that our workplaces abound with servant leaders. In fact, there are articles that suggest that most leaders in industry have characteristics that tilt heavily to the antithesis of servant leadership. For example, a September 2020 article by Allas & Schaninger cites research that suggests that "... the most productive individuals typically have high levels of technical skills and personal drive, but only 30 percent of them are likely to become the kind of leaders that prioritize and support employee satisfaction." The same Allas & Schaninger article (2022, September 22) cites research by organizational psychologist Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic which suggests that "many leaders achieve their positions by being self-centered, overconfident, narcissistic, arrogant, manipulative, and risk-prone" (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013, August 22). Finally, executive compensation has risen to heights so dizzying and stratospheric that one is hard pressed to make even an iota of a case that today's corporate leaders prioritize others over self; and there have been some corporate top brass who do not deserve to be called leaders, let alone servant leaders, because they grew rich at the expense of destroying the value of their firms and the livelihoods of their employees. While some examples of such companies are from Wall Street, there are also plenty from "*Main Street*."

It would be unfair to portray industry as the only sphere that is severely wanting in servant leadership. To a lesser or greater degree, just about every institution and sphere of human activity has lacunae when it comes to servant leadership, including, regrettably, institutions that avidly propound and preach it. The child abuse scandal in the Catholic church and, even more so, the insensitive manner

in which church leaders managed the scandal, illustrates that faith, morality, spirituality, ritualistic prayer, and good intentions do not alchemize into servant leadership. Courage, transparency, love, caring, stewardship, and trust-building are equally important. Similarly, Universities are wont to teach and extoll servant leadership but few of them truly prioritize student success over their financial gain, research pursuits, and intellectual hubris.

Faced with these findings, one may be tempted to abandon the hope that servant leadership will ever become a common phenomenon in industry. However, if history is any indication, time seems to wage an unrelenting counteroffensive, slowly but surely supplanting wrong with right, evil with good, and injustice with justice. If we abandon hope, then our resolve will be vitiated and we will be abetting, by our failure to act, the very wrongs and injustices that we decry. It was the faith-based hope that “*the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice*” that energized Martin Luther King, enlivened his spirit, and kept the flame of his resolve constantly alive (Ellis, 2011, October 21) (The term faith-based is used here not necessarily in a religious or spiritual sense but in the sense that the hope is based on a sense of deep moral conviction and determination that may or may not be rooted in religion or spirituality). Similarly, it was the faith-based hope that every human soul could seek and attain salvation that impelled Jesus to strive to “serve rather than being served, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; and 1 Timothy 2:6).

Faith-based hope is the force that gradually tilts the arc of the moral universe towards justice and good, but it must be abetted by patience. The blight of racism in our great nation took two centuries to change course, the harassment of women in the workplace persisted unabated for ages until the *Me Too* movement exposed it, and it still persists, but, hopefully, to a lesser extent; and many glass ceilings in industry have been shattered in the past two decades. Jesus also enjoined his disciples to have patience. He often rebuked his disciples for being impatient about the coming of God’s kingdom. For

example, in Matthew 24:3, his disciples asked him, “Tell us, when is this going to happen, and what will be the sign of your coming.” Jesus responds with a long discourse detailing the many things that must happen before his coming, and ending his discourse with the words, “As for that day and hour, nobody knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but the Father alone.” These words should serve as a reminder that patience must be exercised in the pursuit of goals. We must not get hung up on the *when* but seek to take small steps in the direction of our goals, not calculating or obsessing over *when* we will reach them but rejoicing in knowing that we are getting just a little closer with each passing day.

A FUTURE OF HOPE

This author remains sanguine that servant leadership will eventually become the norm in industry, although that destination might be the end of a long and arduous journey beset with many headwinds. There are glimmers of hope on many fronts to suggest that servant leadership is gradually making the transition from talk to walk in industry. Here are some of those glimmers:

A growing number of organizations are at least starting to use the term *servant leadership* and trying to practice it. Even if many are now practicing it only weakly (if at all), language has a way of gradually influencing awareness which in turn, influences perceptions and actions.

There have been a growing number of writings and discourses (Stavros, 2019, March 4), as well as increasing discussion in professional circles, arguing that the word *servant* in *servant leadership* is redundant, meaning that leadership is servant leadership. This is a very encouraging trend that has major implications for the future because once business schools and corporate trainers make this switch equating leadership with servant leadership, then future generations of leaders will latch on to that mindset and tailor their leadership styles accordingly.

The risks and existential threats that organizations face as a result of disruption, competition, technology advances (including AI and machine

learning), worker shortages, remote work and changing work patterns, etc. may leave organizations no option but to adopt servant leadership. An indication of this is the growing numbers of organizations realizing the need to embark on agile transformations – nimbly transforming their organizations into becoming more efficient and productive in order to outdo their competition or sometimes to merely ensure their future relevance and existence. A very encouraging development is that these agile transformations adopt (in spirit, at least) agile methodologies like Scrum which have been built on the principles of servant leadership. For example, the Scrum Master is defined as a servant leader, so organizations that use Scrum are forced to adopt servant leadership – even if it grates against their culture (ScrumAlliance, 2023)! Scrum strongly promotes trust and transparency and is founded on the values of commitment, courage, focus, openness, and respect. More than 50% of organizations use Scrum (or some variation of it), although the use of Scrum may be restricted to only some parts of those organizations. Of course, there are organizations that do not use Scrum but strive to practice servant leadership. There is an interesting and heartwarming story about how Netflix CEO Reed Hastings first learned about servant leadership (Radford, 2015, June 17).

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This discussion about servant leadership would be incomplete without touching on the notion of followership. Obviously, without followers there can be no leaders. As essential and desirable as it is for industry to have servant leaders, there must be a code of behavior for followers. Even the most selfless leader can be thwarted or even sabotaged by scheming or crafty followers who might want to further their agendas. Judas is a classic example.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, servant leadership is sparse in our industries and workplaces today, but the tide is shifting, even if very slowly. The fact that the success and, in some cases, the very survival of a growing number of organizations depends on their undertaking agile transformations that necessitate servant leadership, might just be the moral universe's way of slowly bending its leadership arc towards the genuine but powerful style of history's great and humble servant leaders. Or could it be mother nature's tactic of gently diverting her immature children away from their arrogant and self-serving instincts towards the inner simplicity and humility that enriches and nurtures their souls? Or might it be yet another small stride in the inexorable march of the kingdom of God towards our planet?

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