

Teachers as Servant Leaders: Relevance of Servant Leadership Characteristics in Teaching Profession

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Abstract

Leadership is a process, whereby one individual influences a group of individuals to realize a common goal. Great leaders mostly engage themselves in resolving problems and concentrate on development. A servant leader instead, remains part of the group and transforms the members to grow healthier, wiser, freer, autonomous, and more likely themselves become servants. The servant leader's first priority is to 'serve others' and find satisfaction in others' growth and development. If teachers adopt the servant leader role and accept the responsibility as facilitators, students will get involved in learning and establish highest levels of trust, respect and honesty. This will eventually empower the students and lead them towards better future. Given the current educational plight, which puts great emphasis and stress to teachers in forging a harmonious relationship with the students and a conducive learning environment in the classroom, this article becomes significant in exploring how servant leadership characteristics benefit best for the teachers to achieve good results in their teaching profession.

1. Introduction

Robert K. Greenleaf coined the term 'servant leadership' first in "The Servant Leader", published in 1970. The concept of servant leadership was due to the inspiration after reading Hermann Hesse's "Journey to the East", in which, one Leo, who accompanies the party as the servant, does menial chores, sustains them with his spirit and song. When he disappears, everything falls apart, as the party could not make it without Leo, the servant. Later, the party discover that Leo, the servant was the head of the "Order" and the noble leader, which sponsored their journey.

Robert K. Greenleaf, while working as an AT&T executive, during 1977, conceptualized the "Servant Leadership" style and hypothesized that more servants should emerge as leaders, or should follow only servant leaders.

In a sense, Greenleaf was not the first one who introduced the servant leadership notion. For instance, Jesus Christ is one of the best examples who practiced and acknowledged servant leadership thousands of years earlier.

Bible accounts in many instances how Jesus followed and taught leadership style to his disciples. Few instances are: "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. "Not so with you, instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (NRSV Bible, Mark 10:43). Jesus taught and demonstrated servant leadership traits during his life. Jesus took off his outer clothing, covered a towel around his waist and began to wash his disciples' feet as there was no servant present. He also explained his act to his disciples, "I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (NRSV Bible, John 13:13-15).

2. Servant-Leadership Theory of Robert K. Greenleaf

Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970 first proposed the servant leadership model. He published many essays and books on servant-leadership, viz. seminal essay titled "The Servant as Leader" in 1970; this was developed into a book titled "Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness" in 1977; "The institution as servant" (1979), in

which Greenleaf discussed the servant-leadership within institutions; “Trustees as servants” (1979) for servant-leadership among trustees; “Teacher as servant” (1979) servant leadership among teachers in educational institutions. His other works are “The power of servant leadership” (1998); “On becoming a servant-leader” (1996); and “Seeker and servant” (1996).

In Greenleaf’s words,; “The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead”.¹

A servant leader is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to appease an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. The “leader-first” and the “servant-first” are two extreme styles. Between them there are blending and combinations that are part of the endless diversity of human nature.²

3. Relevance of Servant Leadership Characteristics in Teaching Profession

Larry Spears based on Greenleaf’s ideas on servant leadership proposed ten characteristics of servant leadership. They are: “Listening, Empathy, Healing, Awareness, Persuasion, Conceptualization, Foresight, Stewardship, Commitment to the Growth of People, and Building Community”.³ This article analyze, how the servant leadership traits help the teachers to serve the students community better and guide them to achieve the effective results in education.

3.1. Listening

Greenleaf considered leadership is not unidirectional - followers are also creative and capable. Hence, leaders should actively listen to their followers. Listening is a critical communication tool, necessary for accurate communication and for actively demonstrating respect for others. According to Greenleaf, “Only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem first by listening”.⁴ Leaders should be aware of the level of the listeners and listening is one of the ways to get information and determine listeners’ knowledge and readiness.

Effective leaders listen to their subjects’ ideas, perceptions, motivations, and needs. Rutter found that active listening ensures better leader-follower interaction, which results in quality leader-follower relationships.⁵ McGee-Cooper and Trammell argue that in order to completely comprehend the followers’ (students’) ideas and thoughts, a leader (teacher) should engage in deep and respectful listening. Students become creative, when teachers did not pass any judgement while the student was speaking.⁶

One of the crucial characteristics of servant teachers is allowing the students to determine their own learning needs. In the conventional education method, a teacher is a mere medium of transferring the relevant knowledge to the students. But a servant teacher listens to the student, and understands their needs, which helps the teacher to create environments to facilitate and implement their needs.⁷

3.2. Empathy

Empathy is the skill of a person to comprehend the reality from the viewpoint of the other persons and react accordingly. Empathy is a key quality of a servant leader to make their subjects feel that they are accepted and recognized.⁸ A leader with the empathy trait would identify the subjects’ moods and passions and make decisions taking into account their feelings.⁹

Servant leaders put themselves mentally and emotionally in their followers’ position so that they can understand their followers’ experience. Greenleaf questions, “How could a leader best serve their followers, if they did not understand them?” Servant leaders accept others and feel empathy for them. The servant leaders never reject but always accept the person.¹⁰

In the class room a servant teacher understands students’ anxiety. This may be due to a concern over a lack of knowledge or simply a fear of the unknown. The teacher should

empathize with the students and calm these fears. A best servant teacher approach is creation of a comfortable and conducive classroom environment so that the students do not hesitate to express their opinions and ideas; it is the prime duty of the teacher to encourage this behavior among the students.¹¹

3.3. Healing

Healing is a process of expressing concern and interest towards the students' overall wellbeing, particularly during the times of need or difficulty or stress experienced by the student and also the ability to recognize when and how to foster the healing process, ability to heal the lost hope, broken relationships and failed dreams.¹²

Healing is to make whole - both physically and emotionally. The servant leader recognizes the shared human desire to find wholeness in one's self, and supports it in others; and exerts a healing influence upon individuals and institutions.¹³ According to Greenleaf, listening and empathising would help the leader to help the followers to cope with their stress, trauma, and burdens effectively.

Servant teachers accept the failure of students and understand that such failures are part of the learning process. Servant teachers provide a safe milieu to accept failure, cope with negative spirits, hurt-emotions, and relationships, but then works to heal and rebuild the student's self-confidence and self-esteem after a failure, which builds potential force of transformation and integration.¹⁴

3.4. Persuasion

Servant leaders are capable of persuasion. The effective servant leader is capable of promoting group harmony by using gentle but clear and continuous persuasion, and not by exerting group consensus through their position or power as a master.¹⁵ Greenleaf notes, "a fresh look is being taken at the issues of power and authority, and people are beginning to learn, however haltingly, to relate to one another in less coercive and more creatively supporting ways".¹⁶ Servant leadership uses personal, not the power of their position they hold, to coerce their followers and achieve the objectives.¹⁷ Persuasion of a servant leadership is not in the sense of organizationally directive way, but for the best interests of their followers.

Persuasion is a crucial ability, a combination of charisma, encouragement, influencing and urging without authority or coercion.¹⁸ The servant teacher trusts on his/her power of persuasion (not authority) and helps the students understand why a particular answer (or approach) is correct; explains to students why a certain topic (or concept) is important through reasoning, also provides the students the opportunity to articulate their own opinions instead of merely imposing his (teacher's) idea; redirects students' trust, admiration, and respect.¹⁹

3.5. Awareness

Servant leaders should have awareness and perception. Lack of awareness results in missing the leadership opportunities. Awareness helps the leader to differentiate between the urgent and the important.²⁰

Awareness includes both 'general' and 'self-awareness'. Teachers with servant leadership behaviours are aware of the several exterior factors that would affect their behaviour, values, identity, goals, capabilities, and personality.²¹ Servant teachers are aware of the students' reaction to the lesson plan and teaching methods. Servant teachers adapt to the existing situation and environment to serve the needs of the students, which enables them to gain a holistic perspective of the situation.²²

3.6. Foresight

Foresight is closely related to awareness. Servant leaders have foresight, intuition, awareness, a kind of six senses to "foresee the unforeseeable" - particularly for negative

consequences. Failure to see the unforeseeable results in the loss of leadership. Greenleaf wrote, “Foresight is better than average speculation about the future”.²³

According to Slaughter, foresight is the vision of the mind - a human characteristic, ability, and course that pushes the limits of perception forward in four ways: (a) by assessing the consequences of present actions, decisions, etc.; (b) by sensing and preventing problems before they occur; (c) by weighing the consequences of possible future events; and (d) by visualizing aspects of the desired features.²⁴

Foresight is the providence by virtue, of planning sensibly for the future. Servant teachers are intuitive, show skills in ‘classroom management’, ‘instruction’ and ‘vision’ towards the success of the students²⁵. Foresight is paramount to developing follower buy-in. Servant teachers use their foresight and attempt to predict how students would react to a certain lesson plans or teaching method; plan for the unknown and are committed to adopt a student-centred learning environment; aware and mindful of the future consequences of the present situation.²⁶

3.7. Conceptualising

Conceptualising is also associated with awareness and foresight. Servant leaders are not only capable of conceptualizing (the goal or vision) but also able to communicate those concepts. Servant leaders can comprehend solutions for anticipated problems. Servant-leaders persuade their followers towards the goal or vision.²⁷

Conceptualization involves inventing or planning an idea and developing it. Servant leaders are capable of thinking beyond the proximal certainties. Servant teachers are attuned to ‘above-the-line’ levels of thought, conceptualize how all of the parts fit together to make the whole and are able to communicate the significance of this to the students; conceptualize the future of the students, which influence their functioning and accomplishment.²⁸

3.8. Commitment to Growth

Commitment to growth is a demonstrated appreciation, encouragement, providing opportunities, removing obstacles for the followers so that they become healthier, wiser, freer, and autonomous. According to Greenleaf, commitment to the growth is a shared process; is the secret of institution-building; is building a team of people by lifting them up to grow taller than they would otherwise be.²⁹

Commitment to the growth of students involves helping and ensuring opportunities to the students to engage with the challenges they face, so that it results in the growth and success of the students. A servant leader will not be self-oriented; he/she always works for and finds satisfaction in his/her followers’ accomplishment.

The servant teacher identifies the requirements of the students and makes effort to create an opportunity an environment to identify and address the needs, beyond their regular job responsibilities. Servant teacher makes a commitment to personal, professional, spiritual, and emotional growth of their students; understands that the learning process is never finished and is continually seeking feedback in an effort to improve; value their students beyond their performance they contribute.³⁰

3.9. Stewardship

Organizational stewards or trustees are concerned both for the individual followers and the whole organization, and its impact relationship with all of society.³¹

Stewardship is the willingness to be responsible for the well-being of the larger community/organization by operating in the service of those around him/her, it is the principle of taking responsibility.³² Effective leadership is not only the possession of essential skills, but also skills to adapt to the situation and guide his followers. Stewardship is a critical characteristic of a servant teacher. The servant teacher views him/herself as a steward; believes that servant teachers should contribute positively to their students; feels responsible to elicit the maximum potential or capability from their students (followers), who were

entrusted to them; accepts the role of steward within and outside their organization, for the community, and their profession; and they strive to encourage the students to be stewards as well.³³

3.10. Community Building

Greenleaf was concerned and remarked that modern society has lost the community. According to Smith, “The rise of large institutions has eroded community, the social pact that unites individuals in the society.”³⁴ All that is needed to rebuild the community as a viable life form is for adequate servant leaders to show the way. Greenleaf theory posits that sense of community arises only by the actions of individual servant leaders.

A servant teacher understands the mutual dependency of the students and the community and works towards the development of the students, which ultimately builds and develops his/her community. As stewards, servant teachers understand the significance of building a community inside and outside the classroom.³⁵ They strive to develop a conducive environment in the classroom, where students feel comfortable for sharing their ideas and opinions; instils the importance of holding others accountable in the minds of the students through group assignments and/or class participation.³⁶

4. Conclusion

Critics argued that servant leadership theory is only based on philosophical theory, undefined, and without empirical support; only filled with anecdotal evidence; intensive academic research on empirical evidence still remains in its infancy. From the social perspective, the theory has been criticised as feminist, gender-based, and/or religious and biased towards patriarchal norms; viewed as spiritual and moral; practicality and applicability of this theory in practice in the real world situation is questioned; ignores accountability of individuals and different levels of skill among the followers; and in terms of current behavioural sciences, servant leadership theory still remains in its infancy and not empirically connected with organizational performance. Russell appraise that servant leadership theory focuses only on the inherent quality and personal value of the leader and not on the external skills required, which makes it difficult for the organizations to ‘operationalize’ it practically.

We need to understand clearly that leadership is always something given to a person or assumed by the person, which could be taken away. Whereas, a person’s ‘servant’ nature is inherent and could not be taken away, not bestowed or assumed, as the person is a ‘servant’ first.

Greenleaf stated that a servant leader accepts, emphasizes, and never rejects people but may sometimes deny accepting some of the other person’s assertiveness or performances as good enough.

Servant leadership is an approach to leadership that embraces the opportunity for the leaders to embrace service to their followers. This approach to leadership puts the goals, needs, and development of followers ahead of those of the leader. A servant leader is a servant first and a leader only secondly.

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