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Servant leadership in organizations

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Servant Leadership in Organizations: The Case of Australia

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Management theory is now focusing on ethical issues in corporate culture and business practice. There is a clear trend towards emphasizing positive aspects of organizational behaviour: transparency, corporate responsibility, spirituality and management, servant leadership. Servant leadership is to lead with service above self and for others' benefit. Popular press accounts show that CEOs with servant leadership qualities are able to lead their corporations to prosperity through practising high levels of corporate and individual morality and empowering employees. Yet evidence of the servant leader phenomenon is still largely anecdotal. After examining the general literature on ethical leadership in organizations, we focused on ethical and other components of corporate servant leadership, based on our detailed empirical study of servant leaders in Australian organizations. (121 words)

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Introduction

This paper explores the practice of ethical leadership and develops our understanding of it by focusing on the ethical and other components of an emerging new paradigm in management studies of leadership - servant leadership. The model of servant leadership is derived from styles of leadership practised historically by notable leaders and is used here to evaluate the empirical evidence on corporate servant leaders in Australia. We then compare this body of data with anecdotal writings about servant leadership largely derived from U.S. corporate contexts.

Ethical behaviour by business leaders is crucial for the long-term welfare of the community. Modern business practice is largely driven by the profit motive, sometimes at the expense of individual or collective human welfare. When corporate leaders face the dilemma of making policies and decisions for the good of their organizations, largely conceived of in terms of its profits, which may impact negatively on the wider society, good sense would point to the prerequisite of moral stature as a characteristic of those leaders. Skill and knowledge alone may not be sufficient criteria for the appointment of leaders to positions of corporate power. Recently, there are cases where corrupt practices by leaders caused the premature demise of hitherto large and successful corporations (Surowiecki, 2002). By using servant leaders as examples of ethical leadership, this study aims to contribute to organizational wellbeing for stakeholders and the community, in the wake of corporate collapses attributed to greed and dishonesty (Millman, 2002; Milton-Smith, 1995; Timmons & Prasso, 2002).

Up till recently, theories of servant leadership have been based on anecdotal evidence (Greenleaf, 1977). It is acknowledged that a substantial degree of empirical data is needed to develop this concept further (Russell & Stone, 2002). Hence, we

aim to contribute some Australian empirical evidence to validate the prevailing anecdotal notions of servant leadership. Leadership theory has taken a new turn in recent decades. Trait theories of leadership (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Magnusen, 1995; Stogdill, 1948) have given way to leadership theories emphasizing the leader's vision, skills, and ability to empower subordinates (Argyris, 1998; Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000; Nanus, 1992). Despite these new directions, the personal characteristics of the leader, his or her moral values and ethical behaviour, have been neglected in the academic leadership literature. However, there is a gradual increase in appeals for the inclusion of a focus on the ethical behaviour in recently published leadership literature (Dickson, Smith, Grojean, & Ehrhart, 2001; Giampetro-Meyer, Brown, Browne, & Kubasek, 1998; Trevino, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). This demonstrates that the centrality of ethics and morality in the conduct of business has a strong intrinsic appeal. Writing about the broad spectrum of leadership styles, Burns (1978, p. 455) found that morality is so central to leadership that he declares, "leadership is morally purposeful."

Ethical Leadership Revisited

It is widely accepted that an ethical stance should be central to a leader's perception of his or her role (Kouzes & Posner, 1990; Selvarajah, Duignan, Suppiah, Lane, & Nuttman, 1995). The challenging question is "should an unethical or an immoral person be accepted as a leader?" Ethical behavior is seen as the manifestation of a collection of moral values such as integrity, justice, uprightness, and decency (Ciulla, 1995; Giampetro-Meyer et al., 1998). Ethical behavior is generally considered to be "doing the right thing." A good test of whether an action is ethical or not is to ask oneself, "Is my action towards the other person good enough for me if I were in their

position?" Daft (2002, p. 529) states, "Ethics is difficult to define in a precise way. In general, ethics is the code of moral principles and values that governs the behavior of a person or group with respect to what is right or wrong. Ethics sets standards as to what is good or bad in conduct and decision making." Different writers have expounded various facets of ethical leadership such as the personal character of the leader (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Mitchell, 1993), the process of leading (Enderle & Tavis, 1998; Milton-Smith, 1995), the context in which leadership takes place (Cohen, 1995; Dickson et al., 2001), the rationale behind the act of leading (Burns, 1978; Keeley, 1995; Rost, 1993), and the prescribed strategies for staying ethical (Ludwig & Longenecker, 1993; Trevino et al., 2000).

Ethical behavior by leaders is usually voluntary, rather than enforced by the law, but most professional organizations have their written code of ethics to guide their members' actions. Quite obviously, the motivating force for ethical behavior would be intrinsic rather than compliance to external regulations. However, for the purpose of this paper, only the ethical aspects of styles of leadership are discussed.

What is Servant Leadership?

Servant leadership is a concept encompassing the character, actions and intentions of the leader (Blanchard, Hybels, & Hodges, 1999; Greenleaf, 1977) when leading others, in such a way as to promote the wellbeing of others above him or herself. Jesus Christ taught that leaders should focus on serving the people, as opposed to adopting authoritarian attitudes towards them. Accordingly, he advocated that leaders should practice humility. He says, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your

servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave” (Matthew, 20: 25-27). The events in Palestine around AD 30, when Jesus Christ lived and taught the principles of servant leadership by example to his disciples and the community, make up the oldest written record of servant leadership in practice. Of late, many assert that this model can be applied to business or management situations (Blanchard et al., 1999; Briner & Pritchard, 1998; Covey, 1992; Manz, 1998; Wilkes, 1998). In a similar vein, Greenleaf (1977) promotes the idea that a servant leader intends first to serve others and promote their wellbeing above his or her own, and only then to lead. The Greenleaf model is based on his reading of Herman Hesse’s short novel “Journey to the East” where the central character is a mystical figure named Leo who served as a servant to the search party but was later found out to be the leader of a spiritual order. Greenleaf later concluded that a great leader is first experienced as a servant to others (Spears, 1996). Although Greenleaf’s model is conceptual and the source of inspiration is different from the Jesus model, it does have many similar characteristics. Greenleaf’s work has had a profound influence on the thoughts of some management thinkers and practitioners (Senge, 1990; Spears, 1995).

Writing in a scholarly journal, Russell (2001) argues that values such as humility, equality, love, integrity and honesty underpin the practice of servant leadership. During the last 15 years, there have been variations in the anecdotal writings about servant leadership, but the themes have remained largely similar. Distilling the key themes from these writings, the characteristics of the servant leader can be summarized into the following attributes: altruism, appreciation, awareness, building community, coaching, commitment, communication, conceptualisation, empathy, empowerment, encouragement, exemplary conduct, facilitation, giving, humility, honesty and integrity, just, listening, loving, risk-taking, serving, spiritual,

moral, stewardship, supportive, trusting, visionary, and wisdom (Blanchard et al., 1999; Block, 1993; Chin, 2002; Covey, 1992; DePree, 1997; Fairholm, 1998; Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Ferris, 1988; Greenleaf, 1977; Halal, 1997; Kanungo & Conger, 1993; Kouzes & Posner, 1990; Manz, 1998; Melrose, 1995; Miller, 1995; Pollard, 1997; Rinehart, 1998; Russell, 2001; Russell & Stone, 2002; Spears, 1996).

Are Servant Leaders Ethical?

The psyche of an ethical leader is very much akin to that of a servant leader. Both types of leader demonstrate high integrity and apply moral values in their leadership activities. The great servant leaders in history have shown this ethical behavior in the public domain. Such figures as Mother Teresa (Egan, 1997), Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. (Harding, 1996), Dr Albert Schweitzer (Negri, 1993), Nelson Mandela (MacLeod, 1990), and Mohandas Gandhi (McGeary, 1999), all noted for their ethical standards, are also key examples of historical servant leaders as they each possessed many of the characteristics as described in the anecdotal literature on servant leadership, such as altruism, boldness, humility, kindness, love, and servanthood. They are leaders in both the public and organizational realm because of the non-profit organizations that they led and the voluntary followers that they influenced. For their service to humanity, all of them were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, except for Mohandas Gandhi who was assassinated before his nominations could be accepted. As ethical leaders, they were concerned to do what is right and not be engaged in actions that would harm others.

In the management field, case material often spotlights top managers who demonstrate outstanding levels of integrity. Ethical leaders like Jack Welch of GE and James Strong of Qantas Airlines have built strong organizations over time. However,

servant leaders live beyond ethical principles in that they serve others first, to fulfil a higher calling, sometimes to the point of sacrificing themselves in the leadership process, such as in Gandhi's case (Nair, 1994). We could say that all servant leaders are ethical leaders but not all ethical leaders attain the level of servant leaders, for which a critical mass of more leadership attributes becomes necessary.

Method and Sample

For our research on servant leadership in Australian organizations, we selected five tentative servant leaders was on an “a priori” basis where the individuals have been described in the Australian press and by a leading management-training consultant as possessing servant leader characteristics. From this sample emerged three clear cases of servant leaders (SL) and two cases that proved to be non-servant leaders (NSL). The sample consists of Anglo Australian men and women who are at the pinnacle of successful careers. They hold the position of Chief Executive Officer in their organizations, with the exception of one senior executive (NSL) who reports to the CEO. Five of the common characteristics of servant leadership selected from anecdotal writings are identified in the SL cases and these are contrasted with remaining NSL cases. The case study approach (Yin, 1994) using semi-structured interviewing (Charmaz, 2002) for leaders and followers was adopted, triangulated using written documents of the leaders and observations of their behaviour in meetings, etc.. The data is analysed using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data Analysis

CASE 1: Servant Leader (SL) Gerry

Gerry, a pseudonym, is the CEO of the largest renewable energy resource company in Australia. He is a soft-spoken and courteous man. Physically, Gerry is of small build and shorter than most of his direct reports. He was forthright in expressing his views during the interview. His openness in sharing information about himself and the

organization he leads was impressive. He appears to be a simple and humble person. This is confirmed in my interviews with his direct subordinates. Gerry was appointed CEO from another large organization at the time when this organization was at its lowest ebb due to forced disaggregation by government regulations. Staff morale was very low due to redundancies and loss of vision. With Gerry at the helm, the corporation soon turned around. The staff excelled in their duties and showed great enthusiasm: in their own words, "we don't want to let Gerry down."

CASE 2: Servant Leader (SL) named Susan

Susan is the CEO of a very large security services organization in Australia employing over 12,000 people. Susan possesses many of the characteristics of a servant leader, although she has not been named directly as such in the popular press and academic journals that describe her leadership attributes. Her appointment generated a lot of excitement in the state community as it significantly boosted morale. She has successfully tackled organizational problems such as corruption, and staff resignations resulting from dissatisfaction at work. In her youth, she was the leader of a church group. She ended the interview by stressing that she would act without fear or favour to serve the community and would not succumb to inappropriate interference from any quarter.

CASE 3: Servant Leader (SL) Daniel

Daniel is the CEO of the executive training college for one of Australia's leading organizations. He is well respected and liked by all his juniors. He does not order his subordinates around, yet he has a lot of influence over them, and enjoys their support. Prior to this, Daniel spent 32 years in operations and was promoted through rank and

file to his current position, which he has now held for 10 years. He is tall and burly, 58 years old with a good sense of humour. Daniel has a strong Christian background from his younger days. He has stopped going to church but his "belief stays," he said. His educational background is modest but he has a charming personality. Needless to say, his interpersonal skills are exceptional.

Case 4: Non-Servant Leader (NSL) Laura

Laura is the CEO of one of Australia's largest city councils, their first woman CEO. Her background is in social work and local government. She was appointed about 12 months ago from outside the city council. The other two finalists for this position were the two general managers who now report to her. Initially, she faced difficulties in her relationship with the two general managers. Over the months, things improved and she has now found her feet in the organization. From my interviews with her subordinates, she does not appear to be a servant leader. Instead two of them described her as a charismatic leader: her presence is captivating and her style was a sea change from the previous CEO.

Case 5: Non-Servant Leader (NSL) Derek

Derek is the head of a division in the largest mail services corporation in Australia. He was proclaimed by a prominent management consultant to be a servant leader but this was not confirmed in subsequent interviews with his staff. Derek talked about some qualities that are associated with servant leadership (although we were careful not to mention servant leadership to him) but he does not exhibit these, according to most of his staff. He appears to be more of a transformational leader.

We interviewed 38 people in this research and have rich case material but in view of the space limitations of this paper, we will only pick up five key attributes of servant leadership and examine them in relation to the data about historical and American contemporary servant leaders. These attributes stand out as central to servant leadership and not identified in other leadership paradigms such as charismatic (Conger, 1989)(House, 1977) and transformational (Bass, 1990)(Tichy & Devana, 1986) leaderships.

Altruism

This attribute has been mentioned by some of the writers to be a central element of the personality of servant leaders (Blanchard, 2000; Greenleaf, 1977). Altruism is self-sacrificial behaviour, the forfeiting one's own interests for the sake of others. Rather than altruism, it is more common to observe business leaders exhibiting egoism and self-centredness. Altruism in servant leaders is well depicted in the cases of Mother Teresa and Dr Albert Schweitzer. Mother Teresa is well known for her selfless work amongst the hopelessly poor and dying community in Calcutta, India. Similarly, Dr Albert Schweitzer served as a medical doctor in Africa and, even in old age, continued to serve the African people rather than to return to a life of comfort in the West.

We asked Gerry (a SL) whether he had received any reward, promotion, or commendation for a job well done and his reply was "Nothing at all. I still have the same salary as when I came. I have no bonuses, no special incentives, and no arrangements of a financial nature. My salary is rewarding in itself, appropriate to the position. Personal rewards for me are in achieving these things, which the organization sets out to do." One of Gerry's general managers said that Gerry would

sacrifice his own time by coming into work much earlier than usual in order to meet with him upon request because Gerry is just too busy during normal work hours. At the large security services organization, a senior executive who reports to Susan (another SL) remarked that "She is less focused about the Susan factor and she is certainly not driven by ego. She is not driven by having the biggest car or the biggest desk or the biggest and best computer or those sort of trimmings in the office." Contrary to Gerry's and Susan's case, Kets de Vries (1993) identified narcissistic leaders to be in need of power and prestige, sometimes manipulating others to achieve their ends. They would otherwise be described as self-seeking or egotistic. Laura (a NSL) is in contrast to Susan (a SL). She is not exactly a narcissistic leader but according to her direct subordinate, a senior executive, she is far from being altruistic. He says he wouldn't "cross" her and that she has a very "healthy ego." He explained, "She is not the type who serves others but in her job she has to serve others. Well, I think she's ambitious, and a lot of the things that she does, she does for herself." On a softer note, one of her general managers said that Laura's style is quite participative or collaborative but she is not a leader who would serve others and that it is quite clear that she is "the leader."

Servanthood

The desire to serve others is identified as a hallmark in servant leaders (Greenleaf, 1977; Pollard, 1997). In the examples of Mother Teresa and Dr Albert Schweitzer, they served altruistically. Some companies like Shell are trying to introduce this dimension of service beyond considerations of rank into their corporate culture, recognising that every employee has the potential to be "a leader and a servant" (Brenneman, Keys, & Fulmer, 1998) while others like TD Industries in Dallas led by

servant leader Jack Lowe, Jr. (Tarrant, 1999) and the Australian hire firm Kennards (Davison, 2002) have reaped good profits under this leadership style, even during harsh economic times.

The personal assistant to Daniel (SL) fell ill and was hospitalised for three weeks. Her colleagues rang her to make sure that her family requirements were all right while she was at hospital because she has two young babies. Daniel also assisted her husband to make sure that they are all right. She explained, "There are not a lot of bosses that do that." Dickson et al. (2001) argues that leaders in an organization shape the ethical climate which in turn can institutionalise the values in the corporate culture and affect all organization members. By comparison, Derek (NSL) was seen as unhelpful by some of his subordinates because of his refusal to mentor them, in spite of his very influential position within a large organization, and his good business knowledge and skills. The task of mentoring is part of servanthood. He could have imparted some of his "wisdom" but he did not. Derek is seen as "having a personal drive that is in tune with his own career" by one of his executives. The narcissistic personality is one of three types identified by Freud, and one of the weaknesses of a narcissistic leader is distaste for mentoring due to the lack of empathy and extreme independence (Maccoby, 2000).

Humility

Jim Collins (2001) sought to answer the question, "can a good company become a great company and, if so, how?" in his book "Good to Great" and came out with the formula of "personal humility plus professional will" for the successful leader. He confessed that this humility and modesty is not what you would expect to see in highly successful leaders. Humility is found in all

the great historical servant leaders, including Jesus Christ. It is a quality of the heart and soul of the leader. According to Ken Blanchard (2000), the servant leader willingly “shares power” and “receives criticism and advice as gifts.” In the Australian case, a human resource executive described to us that her boss, Gerry (SL) is very “authentic.” He can laugh at his mistakes and is prepared to make a public admission of these. This puts him in the “human category to your same level.” Because of this, the executive feels unthreatened when interacting with her boss. In a contrasting incident, a general manager recounted to us that his boss, Laura is a bit “dogmatic” when making decisions. He felt that he was a little bit “excluded” by her and she has not “appreciated” all his skills.

Integrity

In regard to integrity, Jesus says, “He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much” (Luke, 16: 10). In this teaching, Jesus shows that the character of integrity in a leader relates to being consistent. Greenleaf (1977, p. 10) put it in another way, “Rather, they (followers) will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants. To the extent that this principle prevails in the future, the only truly viable institutions will be those that are predominantly servant led.” In validating this characteristic, Susan's (SL) deputy who is head of operations says, “She just likes things to be evidence based. She challenges, questions, supports people, and sort of dies for the cause personally, you know.” We were able to confirm this view with two other senior executives in this organization. For

this, she was highly respected and praised by members at all levels of the organization. In an opposing case, although Derek (NSL) has been successful in the output of his division and has strong bonds with the senior management, his subordinates see him as needing improvement in the integrity area. One of his executives reflected, “sometimes he says one thing and does another.” Another one of Derek's executives tactfully confirmed this malaise, “If he wants the group to work as one big team ... he needs to perhaps show that leadership style which provides some consistency in terms of values and how he actually interacts with different people.”

Exemplary Conduct

All the historical servant leaders mentioned above displayed exemplary conduct and provided the example for the movement that they led. Adding to the list, William Booth, the founder of Salvation Army set an impeccable record for honesty and integrity to his worldwide followers. It was observed, “Although many millions of dollars had passed through his hands, he died a poor man” (Whalen, 1992). Abraham Lincoln was described as a servant leader who treasured honesty and became a role model for many American presidents and the American people (Gingrich, 1998). It is widely known that followers model themselves upon their leaders. Exemplary conduct has been proposed as a key attribute in the servant leadership literature (DePree, 1997; Melrose, 1998; Russell, 2001).

In the case of Daniel (SL), the organisational culture bears the stamp of his values. We observed that employees mirror the Chief's work practices and his courtesy and sense of humour. At the same time, Daniel expects his

staff to be diligent in their work. A subordinate explained, "He gives a lot of his own time too. He works long hours to be supportive. Again I have no difficulty in approaching him if I was having some difficulties with the work that I was doing. Daniel always gives you positive feedback that is warranted." An opposing situation is illustrated in the case of Derek (NSL) when he tried to institute new behavior in his staff members by running workshops led by an external consultant. Subsequently his staff noticed that he was not living up to the example agreed upon by group members. One of his executives remarked, "...some of those things maybe weren't taken on board by Derek as well. I think he could get better in the area, I guess, leading by example."

Discussions and Conclusion

How does the paradigm of servant leadership as presented in the anecdotal literature compare with data derived from empirical research on Australian organizational servant leaders? Five characteristics from the paradigm, namely, altruism, servanthood, humility, integrity, and exemplary conduct, are found in Australian organizational servant leaders. Also, Australian servant leaders share these five attributes with historical servant leaders although the historical servant leaders were not running business or profit organizations. Ethical leaders share some attribute with servant leaders such as integrity, exemplary conduct, and the boldness to pursue the right actions. However, ethical leaders do not necessarily need to show the traits typical of servant leaders, such as altruism, servanthood, and humility in order to lead in an ethical way. On the other hand, servant leaders, through the combination of

traits they embody are more than likely to lead according to ethical principles. This is clearly shown in the historical examples.

The existence of ethical and servant leaders is imperative in setting an ethical and moralistic tone to contemporary organizational cultures and changing the status quo of widespread unethical practices, which have been estimated to involve up to 54% of employees in surveys conducted in the U.S. (Daft, 2002, p. 203-204). In the Australian context, and most likely elsewhere, employees and stakeholders are more inclined to prefer such leaders as shown in the American study (Kouzes & Posner, 1990) and replicated in the Asian study (Selvarajah et al., 1995) about credibility.

Management theory is turning to focus on the positive forces at work in organizational behaviour. In the field of leadership studies we can observe the paradigm shifting from a focus on the authoritarian manager leading obedient subordinates, to the participative manager with his or her team players, to the transformational leader who empowers his or her self-responsible contributors to the servant leader who interacts with whole employees (Daft, 2002, p. 211). While ethical qualities in leaders may be present in individual representatives of all these stages, they are not necessary attributes of these styles of leadership. Ethical behaviour and its associated values only emerge as a necessary definitional quality at the level of the servant leader. Hence we aim to contribute to the understanding of ethical leadership in organizations by this discussion of the theory and practice of servant leadership in an Australian context.

(4,369 words)

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