

ASSESSING THE CONCEPTS OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEMPORARY DAYS

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Abstract

This study examines the relevance, application, and challenges of servant leadership in contemporary society. Although the concept rooted in humility, empathy, service, and ethical responsibility has gained prominence in organizational discourse, its practical implementation remains uneven across religious, political, and corporate institutions. The research explores how modern leaders interpret servant leadership principles, the extent to which these principles shape decision-making, and the factors influencing their effectiveness in today's complex socio-political and economic environments. Through a review of existing literature and analysis of contemporary leadership practices, the study identifies gaps between the theoretical ideals of servant leadership and the realities of power dynamics, institutional pressures, and cultural expectations. Findings reveal that while servant leadership can enhance trust, collaboration, and organizational growth, its adoption is often constrained by competitive organizational cultures and leadership models driven by authority rather than service. The study concludes by highlighting the need for intentional policy frameworks, leadership training, and institutional reforms to strengthen servant leadership as a transformative model for contemporary leadership practice.

Introduction

The concept of servant leadership which is probably coined from the biblical injunction which states inter-alia, if you must lead them, you must serve them (Matt. 23:11) had become an age-long phenomenon and still prevalent even in the contemporary days. Quite a good number of leaders would like to lay claim to the

fact that a leader must diligently serve his followers, if he truly wants to be a leader. Thus, leaders who ordinarily would not want to cringe and or genuflect before their followers would necessarily bend, such that the adherents would have the strong conviction that he/she (i.e. leader) is truly serving them to the best of his/her interest and ability. Generally speaking, followers normally enamour leaders with that uncommon trait or attribute of serving those who are ordinarily supposed to be serving them. Often, the followers usually speak well of such leaders as exceptionally nice individuals who would usually be vouched for at any time. The acolytes of the leaders who have the attribute of servant leadership always have reason(s) to cherish their style of administration.

Biblical Concepts of Servant Leadership

Part of the concepts of servant leadership is service over self-interest—a leader’s purpose is to serve others, placing the needs of a group above his/her own¹. Ideally, altruism should be the watchword of a leader imbued with servant leadership trait. The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* edited by Hornby defines altruism as the fact of carrying about the needs and happiness of other people more than your own². It is always very cumbersome to put the interest and or comfort of others first. However, the person who is desirous to practice the principle of servant leadership would find it relatively easy to do this. Such a person will not mind to suffer, so as to guarantee the relative or absolute comfort of his/her followers. He / She cultivates the habit of joy when the adherents are comfortable, even as he/she is at the receiving end. This is the type of leader that would, for instance, ensure the payment of the salaries of the subordinates first before his/her own is paid. He / She derives absolute joy in seeing his/her disciples feeding well, paying the school fees of their wards promptly, settle electricity bills as at when due etc, even when he/she cannot do some of these with comfort. According to Shashi, altruism is an ethical doctrine that holds that individuals have an ethical obligation to help, serve, or benefit others, if necessary at the sacrifice of self-interest... Altruism is to ... maintain quite simply that a man may and should discount altogether his own pleasure or happiness as such when he is deciding what course of action to pursue³. Shashi goes on to enthuse that:

It strains plausibility to claim that these altruistic deeds are done in the hope of a return favour. The game theory analysis of this “just in case” strategy where the principle would be “always help everyone in case you need to pull in a favour in return” is a decidedly *non-optimal* strategy where the net expenditure of effort is far greater than the net profit when it occasionally pays off⁴.

Buttressing the above, according to Adeyemo, Jesus used the opportunity to give his disciples another lesson on the qualities of leadership in the Kingdom of

heaven. In the world, leaders are served and can command people to do their bidding. There, leadership is about power and the exploitation of power. But in Jesus' kingdom, leadership means service to those led. It is quite the opposite of what is common in human society. A leader in Jesus' kingdom must be a helper in the biblical sense of the word; that is, a person who comes alongside to enable others to achieve what they need to achieve⁵.

Besides, a servant leader is bound to be humble. The *Webster's Universal Dictionary and Thesaurus* defines humble as having a low estimation of one's abilities; modest, unpretentious, service ... to lower in condition of rank, to humiliate⁶. It should be noted with utmost significance that Matthew, the supposed author of *Gospel According to Saint Matthew* opines that: Now the betrayer had given them a sign saying "The one I shall kiss is the man" (Matt. 26:48) The humility of Jesus was glaringly demonstrated here. Jesus was probably dressed in a similar way with his disciples, therefore, there was no way by which he could be identified by strangers among his disciples. And that was why the betrayer said *The one I shall kiss is the man* ... If Jesus had wished, he could have dressed distinctly that would make him easily identifiable among his twelve disciples. This he did not do, apparently because of his humility. Notice that in the contemporary days, one can see quite glaringly the leader of a musical band, dressed in such a way that differentiate him/her from his band members, and one can easily pin-point him/her. More often than not, whether in secular or religious band, the leader is always distinct. This, Jesus did not do as the leader of the Christian religion which was a clear demonstration of utmost humility. Doubtlessly, humility is the quality of having a modest and realistic view of one's own significance, free from arrogance and pride. It involves accurately assessing your strengths and weaknesses and recognizing that others are equal or superior, but it does not mean having low self-esteem or lack of confidence. Instead, it is characterized by other-centred, rather than self-centred mindset and an openness to feedback and learning⁷. Howe pontificates that humility is:

A Christian characteristic, epitomized in Rom. 12:3: for I say ... to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think. Humility ... is a mental attitude of lowliness ... the opposite of pride. It is that specific grace developed in the Christian by the spirit of God wherein the believer frankly acknowledges that all he has and is, he owes to the Triune God who is dynamically operative in his behalf. He then willingly submits himself under the hand of God ... Thus, humility should not be equated with a pious inferiority complex. It can be pretended on the part of false teachers in acts of self-abasement⁸.

Again, leading by example constitutes part of the concepts of servant leadership. The leader serves as an example by demonstrating the behaviours they want to see in their followers which inspires and motivates the group. Servant leadership do not Lord anything over their disciples. The latter usually allow the former to, not only have their say, but even have their way. Very reasonable consideration is constantly given by the leader to the acolytes, such that the disciples can be happy in whatever they are doing and in anywhere they find themselves. To demonstrate servant leadership, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples (John 13:5). Ordinarily, the reverse was supposed to be the case. Put differently, the disciples were expected to wash the feet of their master, either individually or collectively. Adeyemo submits that Jesus then poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and dry them with the towel that was wrapped around him. Not only was he dressed like a slave, but he was doing the work of slave. Washing feet was such a menial job that no teacher would expect his disciples to do it⁹. Buttressing the position of Adeyemo above, Thomas Hale pontificates that:

Luke has written that at the last supper, Jesus' disciples had been arguing about which of them was going to be greatest (Lk. 22:24). So Jesus showed them example that they should seek to be servants. He told them, *I am among you as one who serves* (Lk. 22:27). Then to show them that He had not come to be served but to serve (Mk. 10:45), He washed their feet. He took the very nature of a servant ... According to Jewish custom, even the lowliest slave didn't have to untie his master's sandals. Thus, Jesus was doing the lowest kind of service for his disciples¹⁰.

Concepts that Impede Servant Leadership in the Contemporary Days

The concept of servant leadership had been played down considerably in the contemporary days. This is probably as a result of ego. Quite a good number of leaders would want to Lord it over their acolyte. The conviction of such leaders is that they are the leaders, therefore, the disciples must necessarily cringe and or genuflect before them. Some individuals are highly egoistic and this would obviously preclude them from practicing the principle of servant leadership. According to Shashi ... in anthropology, this refers to the individual from whom the networks of kinship and relationship and descent are reckoned and traced. In psychology, the term (i.e. ego) is used to refer to the self of the individual and the way they have constructed their personality and identity in society¹¹. Shashi goes on to postulate that in Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the ego is the outcome of the individual's struggle to adapt their basic drives (the "Id") to the imperative control of society and culture (the "super ego"). Between their drives and the coercive influence of social expectation, individuals create a sphere of unique personality¹².

Buttressing the position of Shashi above, *The World Book of Encyclopedia* pontificates thus:

EE goh, is a term used in psychoanalysis to describe one of the three parts of mind. The two other parts are the *id* or instincts, and *superego* or conscience. The ego resolves conflicts among the individual's instinctual impulses, his or her sense of guilt, and the demands of external reality. For example, the ego regulates emotions and impulses that might not be acceptable to other people. The ego also governs such areas as memory, thought and decision making, walking and other voluntary movements, and perceptions, such as hearing, feeling, and sight. Psychoanalysts sometimes use the word *ego* to mean a person's self. In popular usage, the word has come to mean selfishness, self-love or self-esteem¹³.

Furthermore, the environment in which a person finds himself/herself will significantly affect the servant leadership disposition of an individual. In the South-Western part of Nigeria, for example, elders are accorded enormous respect and those elders are not supposed to demean themselves by according much respect to those that are younger than them. In a situation whereby the elders want to reverence the younger ones, the latter would become increasingly uncomfortable, since the environment does not permit that. Shashi succinctly opines that: Human and cultural environment refers to aspects of the environment produced by humans. Environment is all that surrounds man and animal. Since time immemorial, environment has been playing a vital role in the life and living pattern of man. Every man is born in an environment. Apart from his surrounding, man's life on this earth is unthinkable. As long as civilization exists on this earth, man cannot but think of his environment. Man and his environment are inseparable. So, environment is that which surrounds us, which exists around us. Everything which is external to us, which is surrounding us and which has effect on us is part of environment¹⁴. Shashi is not done, as he goes on to postulates that: Everything external to the organism. The physical environment or the ecology within which the people of a community or society are situated. The political and administrative environment includes laws, regulations and official practices in which an organisation or community may operate. The physical, biological and chemical restraints to which action is subject¹⁵.

Closely related to environment on the concept that would make the practice of servant leadership cumbersome is culture. The culture of people can draw a glaring line of demarcation between the leaders and the adherents and or disciples. Again, the culture of the South-West Nigeria, enmoured exceedingly the respect of

elders or bosses by the young and or the acolytes. Yoruba culture does not compromise this by any standard. According to *The World Book Encyclopedia*. Culture is a term used by social scientists for a way of life. Every human society has a culture. Culture includes a society's arts, beliefs, customs, institutions, inventions, language, technology, and values. A culture produces similar behaviour and thought among most people in a particular society¹⁶. The book goes on to enthuse that, people are not born with any knowledge of a culture. They generally learn a culture by growing up in a particular society. They learn mainly through the use of language, especially by talking and listening to other members of the society. They also learn by watching and imitating various behaviours in the society. The process by which people –especially children –learn their society's culture is called *enculturation*. Through enculturation, a culture is shared with members of a society and passed from one generation to the next. Enculturation unifies people of a society by providing them with common experiences¹⁷.

It is pertinent to state unequivocally that the attitude of people can tremendously affect the servant leadership of some individuals. Individually, people are imbued with diverse types of attitudinal disposition, which is inherently peculiar to him/her. This, no doubt, can significantly impinge on the way he/she relates with individuals in the society. The *Webster's Universal Dictionary and Thesaurus* succinctly defines attitude as posture, position of the body; a manner of thought and feeling; behaviour; the position of an aircraft or spacecraft in relation to certain reference points¹⁸. Supporting the above Shashi states that: Attitude refers to a predisposition to react to a given thing, situation, or idea in a given way. Attitudes are usually associated with underlying, deep-seated predispositions¹⁹.

Conclusion

The phrase “if you must lead them you must serve them” expresses the concept of servant leadership, meaning a true leader's primary role is to priorities and serve the needs of their followers. This idea emphasizes humility and a focus on the well-being of the group, as opposed to a leader using their position for personal gain. This principle is found in various religious and secular contexts, notably in the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament (Matt. 20:26-28)²⁰. Jesus state clearly without mincing words that:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:25-28).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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