

Servant Leadership: Learning From Servant Leaders of the Past and Their Impact to the Future

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Abstract:

Leadership is all about influencing others to action and setting a positive example to followers. Servant leadership is one of the most influential approaches to leadership and management. This article depicts lessons that can be extracted from the lives of famous servant leaders— Martin Luther King, Jr, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi. These leaders exhibited and role modeled servant leadership in their lives.

Key Words: Servant leaders, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr

1. INTRODUCTION

Service to others. Empathy, Humility. These are words associated with servant leadership and are an increasingly influential approach to leadership and management. Spears (2005), who is one of the most cited scholars in servant leadership, noted ten characteristics of servant leadership and have served as the foundation for servant leadership scholarship and conceptual frameworks. The ten servant leadership characteristics include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Berger, 2014).

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Mahatma Gandhi are servant leaders selected to extract lessons from in this article. These leaders exemplified servant leadership throughout their lives and have influenced people around the world. Organizational leaders can learn from these servant leaders. This author connected leadership lessons obtained from these three prominent leaders with the current servant leadership theory.

The purpose of this article is to accomplish the following: 1) briefly define and review servant leadership, 2) describe the lives of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Mahatma Gandhi, and 3) provide practical application of servant leadership in the workplace.

2. BACKGROUND OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Service to others is the basis of servant leadership and has emerged as one of the prominent leadership theories today. Although servant leadership has ancient and biblical origins, Robert K. Greenleaf inspired renewed interest in the subject by his essay and noted that leaders must be servant first (Carter & Beal, 2013). The term servant leadership was coined by Greenleaf to emphasize that leadership is enacted by meeting the highest priority needs of employees first and must set aside their personal desires to those of their followers (Ozyilmaz & Cicek, 2015). The premise of servant leadership is to serve others first and the result will be judged in the growth of followers. While Greenleaf helped ignite interest in servant leadership, he is not the originator of the practice of servant leadership (Carter & Beal, 2013).

The resurgence of empirical and practical interest in servant leadership theory can be attributed to a movement away from traditional hierarchical leadership (pyramid model characterized by top-down authority structure). This traditional leadership model indicates that organizational members are expected to serve their leaders. In contrast, the inverted pyramid calls for leaders to be at the bottom of the structure where leaders serve their followers first (Washington, Sutton, & Sauser Jr., 2014).

Greenleaf (1977) summed up servant leadership as follows:

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. He is sharply different from the person who is leader first,

perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve—after leadership is established. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are sharings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature (p. 66).

3. LEADER'S BACKGROUND

Three servant leaders are discussed in this section—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Mother Teresa, and Mahatma Gandhi.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr:

Born in Atlanta, Georgia on January 15, 1929, Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of the most influential leaders in history and a leader of the African-American Civil Rights Movement (The Famous People, 2016). King was son to a minister and a leader in the nonviolent movement. He earned two bachelors degrees and a PhD in theology. After marrying Coretta Scott in 1953, the couple had four children. King received a Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his nonviolent campaign against racism and gave one of the most famous speech in history—“I have a dream.” King was assassinated in 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee (Marques, 2007).

As a leader, King was an eloquent speaker and a charismatic individual during the trying time of the civil rights movement. His positive qualities include fearless, inspiring, strategic, courageous, self-confident, resilient, and communicative. King was a great orator and a strategic thinker during the civil rights movement. Conversely, King's negative qualities include unethical behavior and a womanizer. King was reported to have plagiarized parts of his doctoral dissertation as well as his famous “I have a dream” speech. Finally, King was a habitual womanizer despite being married and a preacher (Marques, 2007).

Mother Teresa:

Born in Kosovo in 1910, Agnes Bojaxhiu, also known as Mother Teresa, was a symbol of love, care and compassion worldwide through her faith and service to others. Raised in a devoutly catholic family, Mother Teresa received her calling as a nun at age 18 and received her religious vows in 1931. She received her “call within a call” in 1940 and founded the religious order “Missionaries of Charity” thereafter. Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1979 for her work in the struggle to overcome poverty and distress. She died in 1997 and was canonized by Pope Francis in 2016 as Saint Teresa of Calcutta (The Famous People, 2016).

As a leader, Mother Teresa is an integral leader who exhibited transformation leadership through her charitable work of helping the poorest of the poor. Her positive qualities include steadfast belief in her mission, disciplined, empathetic, straightforward, visionary, disciplined, and perseverant. Mother Teresa led by example by pursuing her calling of helping the poorest of the poor and showed compassion to the less fortunate around the world. Conversely, Mother Teresa's negative qualities include inflexible and calculated toward her mission of saving souls first. Critics argued that Mother Teresa was not open to other perspectives such as proponents of abortion and artificial contraception (Marques, 2007).

Mahatma Gandhi:

Born on 1869 in Porbandar, Kathiawar, India, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, more commonly known as Mahatma Gandhi, was a lawyer and spiritual and political leader in India who led the struggle for India's independence from the British Empire. Gandhi is most famous for his satyagraha ideology which encompassed a nonviolent strategy of leading. Best remembered for his advocacy of nonviolent means of civil disobedience, Gandhi married Kasturba Makhanji Kapadia through an arranged marriage when they were 13 and 14 years old respectively and had five children. Time magazine named Gandhi as “Man of the Year” in 1930. Although nominated five times for a Nobel Peace Prize, Gandhi never received the price, and the Nobel committee

publicly declared its regret for his award omissions decades later. Gandhi was assassinated in 1948 (The Famous People, 2016).

As a leader, Gandhi exhibited transformational leadership through his nonviolent practice and leading by example. His positive qualities include empathetic, perseverant, strategic and strong belief in his mission, inspirational, intelligent, and resilient. Gandhi was imprisoned and belittled several times but never gave up. He led by example through his humility and frugality in appearance. Conversely, Gandhi's negative qualities include disrespectful toward those closest to him and inflexible and authoritarian. Critics have argued that Gandhi was inflexible to western and material ways and neglected and humiliated his wife during their marriage (Marques, 2007).

4. ANALYSIS OF LEADER BEHAVIOR

Although these three servant leaders are unique individuals, it is interesting to note their similarities:

All held principled beliefs and ideals
Passion for a cause is paramount
Leading by example is highly visible through their actions
All have perseverant and resilient qualities

Dr. King, Mother Teresa, and Gandhi are great examples of servant leadership. All experienced challenges and obstacles in their respective endeavors; however, all three leaders showed great resilience and perseverance in their efforts. Most remarkably, all of the leaders were impassioned about their purpose—Dr. King was a determined civil rights leader, Mother Teresa was empathetic in helping the less fortunate, and Gandhi was persuasive about his nonviolent strategy. Their lives are great examples for others to follow.

An interesting observation of the reviewed individuals demonstrated aligned leadership qualities—determination, resiliency, perseverance, empathy, courage, and strategic vision/insight. Passion is the overarching characteristics that connect all three leaders and is the basis of becoming an unforgettable leader (Marques, 2007).

5. PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Servant leadership has the potential to impact important organizational processes and has been linked to increased trust in organizational leaders, greater citizenship behavior, enhanced collaboration and team effectiveness, and greater level of employee job satisfaction and commitment (Carter & Beal, 2013). Growing and helping leaders to perform at high levels are key for long-term success. A mentoring program geared towards servant leadership is of paramount importance. Moreover, organizations should recruit individuals who possess servant leadership characteristics, qualities, or share similar visions (Tang, Kwan, & Zhang, 2016).

Johnson (2011) offered the following simple habits to help hone servant leadership skills among managers today:

Listen—Find meaningful ways to invite employee and client feedback daily
Appreciate—Tell employees how much they are appreciated everyday
Respect—Treat others the way you would want to be treated
Develop—Coach employees how to be a servant leader themselves
Unleash—Let others shine through empowerment and delegation

Finally, Keith (2013) noted seven key practices that can help servant-leaders become successful: (1) Self-awareness, (2) Listening, (3) Changing the pyramid, (4) Developing your colleagues, (5) Coaching, not controlling, (6) Unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, and (7) Foresight. The ultimate goal of servant leadership is to make the world a better place by focusing on the employees, customers, and

communities (p. 3). For instance, leaders can help develop servant leadership within the organization by participating in community volunteer program (i.e., soup kitchen or food bank). Leading by example is vitally important to effective leadership.

6. CONCLUSION

Servant leadership need not be limited to well-known individuals. Anyone who has a genuine interest for the growth and nurturance of others can pursue servant leadership (Advise America, n.d.). From the lowest to the highest level of an organization, everyone can practice servant leadership. Service to others, empathy, and humility are all components of a servant leader.

Servant leadership seems well suited to providing employees with the empowerment and participatory job characteristics that are related to both employee and customer satisfaction (Melchar & Bosco, 2010). Overall research suggests that investing in servant leadership contributes to desirable employee attitudes, behaviors, and psychological climates at work (Ozyilmaz & Cicek, 2015). Organizations should devote resources to the development of servant leadership.

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