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Discerning the Servant's Path: Applying Pre-Committal Questioning to Greenleaf's Servant Leadership

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Abstract

Robert K. Greenleaf's servant leadership has become an attractive approach for morally-motivated leaders. However, paradoxes found in servant leadership have the potential to create confusion among those individuals interested in its practice. To assist prospective leaders in deciding upon whether to follow the concepts of servant leadership, an exhaustive literature review was conducted by the researcher to find and code definitions from servant leadership-related writings. The results from the initial coding phase were the following themes: Personal Growth, Development, and Empowerment of Employees; Spiritual, Affirmational, and Ethically-Minded Approach toward Employees; Steward Dedicated to Service of Community and Placing Others First; and Traits-Based Leadership. The second round of selective coding yielded Repetitively Embracing Personal Sacrifice as its core theme. Three questions that arose from this specified theme were, "Am I willing to embrace personal sacrifice on a continual basis to practice servant leadership? If so, how do I stay motivated to sustain the concept of putting others first? If not, is there a way to negotiate an understanding where employees are supported in the leadership approach/style I feel most comfortable using?" These self-assessing questions were recommended for connecting Greenleaf's (1977) questions-based logic on the practice of servant leadership between his call to service and the final decision of becoming a servant leader.

Introduction

Servant leadership theory is well known for its selfless approach to managing others. In describing what a servant leader should embody, Robert K. Greenleaf (1977) put forth the image of moral individuals whose main purpose was to act as a resource for their respective employees, nurturing their abilities for the greater good of the organization. The attributes linked to this brand of leadership include being empathetic and accepting of other people, administering healing to strained relationships, promoting accountability beyond organizational walls for the common good of society, and using persuasive measures that appeal to one's sense of decency (Spears, 1998). For loyal practitioners, these affirmations make servant leadership an attractive alternative to authoritative, top-down management styles. Similarly, servant leadership draws strong parallels to religious figures such as Jesus Christ and St. Paul, attracting individuals searching for a morally-just leadership approach (Agosto, 2005).

While servant leadership has wide-ranging appeal, issues on its applicability in real world scenarios remains a source of curiosity. Select scholars have concluded that servant leadership is more philosophy than a techniques-driven leadership model (Prosser, 2010a). Servant leadership is an attitude consisting of intangible qualities that are consciously chosen and incorporated into one's personality (Sendjaya, 2010). The nondescript nature of

the servant leadership approach leads to numerous questions on how to harness these characteristics into a systematic and conceptual method for practicing leadership. As highlighted by Prosser (2010b):

> *How can the absence of a simple definition of servant leadership, and the intentional lack of a formulaic set of rules, be reconciled with a leader's need to appreciate fully how the (servant leadership) concept can be applied within their organizations?* (p. 25)

Contrary perceptions that have been posed regarding servant leadership range from its purported aversion to authoritative power to its lopsided emphasis on employee needs over that of stakeholders (McCrimmon, 2010). As countered by Autry (2004), the confusion between being a supportive servant leader and exercising authority in the form of taking stern measures with an employee does not contradict the approach as servant leaders are still expected to perform necessary duties. It is from the self-perceived paradox of servant leadership that practitioners might show hesitancy in enacting this approach. Whereas establishing servant leadership as a refined method as opposed to an abstract behavioral set is beyond the scope of this paper, generating questions for individuals to assess and reflect upon their commitment to servant leadership ideals is within reason.

Purpose of Paper

The purpose of this paper is to analyze definitions associated with servant leadership, identifying the core theme found across these descriptions to create a series of questions for potential servant leaders to weigh upon before committing themselves to servant leadership. In turn, this paper aims to create a precursor to Greenleaf's questions-based logic on the practice of servant leadership from his foundational work, *The Servant as Leader*.

Processing Greenleaf's Servant Leadership

Robert K. Greenleaf's personal definition of servant leadership remains the standard for understanding the approach he brought into prominence, having been quoted by numerous servant leadership scholars such as Spears (1998) and Sipe and Frick (2009). According to Greenleaf (1977):

> *(Servant leadership) begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead...The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served* (p.13).

Greenleaf's initial response of what servant leadership entails has been expanded upon by subsequent authors. Noted servant leadership scholar Larry C. Spears (1995) wrote of servant leadership: it "attempts to simultaneously enhance the personal growth of workers and improve the quality and caring of our many institutions through a combination of teamwork and community, personal involvement in decision-making, and ethical and caring behavior" (p. 2). Faith-based servant leadership practitioner and situational leadership originator Ken Blanchard (2003) contributed a more transcendent outlook, saying that "servant leadership starts with a vision and ends with a servant heart that helps people live according to that vision" (Blanchard & Hodges, 2003, p.122). For researchers like Patterson (2010), qualities such as love best define servant leadership as this specific act drives the leader to be a guiding force for good. Despite the individual categorizations of Greenleaf's servant leadership, there is an ethical element that is inherent in each account, pointing leaders to their main calling — to assist and care for those around them (Peck, 1995).

Being a resource for others is integral to Greenleaf's brand of servant leadership. To accomplish this feat, he devised a series of questions that operated as an internal checklist meant to align servant leaders with the servant-first approach. One must ask, "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And,* what is the effect on the least privileged in society: will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?" (Greenleaf, 1977, pp.13-14). This question-based approach provides the servant leader with a qualitative outlet to assess the treatment of employees, offering a practical form within which to probe the conscious and unintentional motives attached to the act.

Assessing servant leadership is not a new venture. The development of quantitative instruments for measuring prevailing qualities found in servant leadership may be traced to Laub's (1999) Servant Organizational Leadership Assessment (SOLA) Instrument that uncovered six groupings linked to servant leadership behavior: "values people, develops people, builds community, displays authenticity, provides leadership and shares leadership" (p. 66). Successive instruments have contributed to defining those traits servant leaders prioritize as being vital to the servant leadership paradigm (van Dierendonck, 2011), augmenting previous characteristics established in the primary literature. While useful in formalizing servant leadership, these quantitative instruments explicitly concern themselves with uncovering servant leader attributes found within organizations. They do not necessarily encourage introspection from leaders exploring servant leadership's applicability within their own situation or the intangible spirit of servant leadership similar to Greenleaf's (1977) inquiry.

Recurring Themes from Perceptions on Servant Leadership

After conducting a review of literature ranging from peer-reviewed journal articles to books on, or addressing, servant leadership, numerous repetitive themes were found within the collected writings. Segments of the works were abstracted during an initial coding phase for comparison analysis as performed in qualitative research (Saldana, 2009). Four categorical themes were then generated from the chosen segments and divided into their respective groups with several texts appearing in multiple categories. Those categories were as follows: Personal Growth, Development, and Empowerment of Employees; Spiritual, Affirmational, and Ethically-Minded Approach toward Employees; Steward Dedicated to Service of Community and Placing Others First; and Traits-Based Leadership. A second round of analysis known as selective coding was implemented on the uncovered themes. In selective coding, categorical themes are examined with the purpose of identifying the relational element central to the expressions (Strauss, 1987). The core categorical theme, Repetitively Embracing Personal Sacrifice, served as an outline for creating 3 questions to be used in conjuncture with Greenleaf's (1977) questions for the servant leader.

Personal Growth, Development, and Empowerment of Employees

Making a concerted effort towards energizing employees in their work and subsequent careers was a significant theme for servant leadership authors. Influenced by Greenleaf's (1977) concept of cultivating employee talents, numerous articles pointed to actively taking interest in the personal growth and development of others as essential to the servant leadership approach (McGee-Cooper & Trammell, 1995; McCollum, 1998; Russell & Stone, 2002; Wong & Page, 2003; Smith, Montagno & Kuzmenko, 2004; van Dierendonck & Rook, 2010; Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011). Servant leaders are personally compelled to accept the call for supporting those under their leadership, making certain that they are dedicated to their employees' growth (McGee-Cooper & Trammell, 2001). To accomplish this

feat, leaders must also boost their own efforts at work so as to inspire others to act in a similar fashion (Blanchard, 2002). This focus on employee development must be approached with sensitivity as the well-intentioned leader might inadvertently become an obstacle to the very growth they are looking to nurture (Autry, 2004). If accomplished through selfless means, personal development would cultivate highly-skilled workers who would effectively apply their advanced knowledge to their particular organizations (Russell & Stone, 2002; Wong & Page, 2003; Ebner & O'Connell, 2010). An unencumbered workforce that is permitted to exceed expectations can serve as a catalyst for positive change, improving the output of the organization (De Graaf, Tilley, & Neal, 2004).

Empowerment was another key word used to describe servant leadership. The act of empowering was often depicted as the willingness to give of oneself, including imparting insights and talents to employees for the purpose of preparing them for decision-making activities (Lore, 1998; Spears, 2010). This inclusiveness is expected to support various actions such as collaborative listening, acknowledging the validity of other people's insights, and promoting resourcefulness among individual workers (Block, 2011; Bachelder, 2015). Successively, empowered individuals may exceed projected goals while leadership fulfills their commitment to producing a virtuous work environment (Blanchard, 1998; Farling, Stone & Winston, 1999).

Spiritual, Affirmational, and Ethically-Inclined Leadership

Altruistic ideals frequently associated with being a moral individual constituted a sizeable portion of the servant leadership literature reviewed. From this perspective, servant leadership is illustrated as a method that transcends the organizational self, demanding that leaders examine their own inner lives so as to discover what they truly stand for as human beings while encouraging others under their care to do the same (Wheatley, 2004). Part of this recognition is seeing that human dignity is a spiritual gift that all of humanity shares in and celebrates through acts of compassion (Ferch, 2004). Through this self-renewal process, the servant leader champions acts that endorse the common good, using their authority in a genuine manner that heals mishaps caused by disruptive leadership practices (Page & Wong, 2000; Ferch, 2011). A perceivable consequence of transparent ethical leadership is influencing employees to be morally responsible as their actions can directly affect the institution (Graham, 1995).

Servant leadership as a spiritual, affirmational, and ethically-inclined leadership model derives from the notion that an authentic leader is one who is secure in his or her beliefs, willing to exercise those principles even in the face of adversity (Rinehart, 1998). Tying into this understanding of servant leaders as positive guiding forces is research that confirms servant leadership's inclination towards being altruistic stewards who display empathy, wisdom, and logic that support continual progress (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). These attributes are second nature to the servant leader whose spiritual life is centered on loving others through supportive measures (Patterson, 2010). In sum, servant leadership is an organic exchange between leader and group, where those being led openly choose to follow a leader based on the values he or she espouses (Fryar, 2001).

Steward Dedicated to Serving Community and Placing Others First

The analogous interplay of servant leadership and stewardship was noted in several leadership texts. Servant leaders, according to authors Peter Senge (1990) and Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2003) are stewards who care for their employees' welfare by supplying resources, advisement, and encouragement with the intent of fulfilling a collective

institutional vision. Greenleaf-inspired author Max Dupree (1989) expanded on the role of stewardship, proclaiming that leaders have an obligation to their companies, its workers, and those who will eventually become part of the institution, weighing these factors before pursuing managerial actions. Concerning one's self with this community of people remains pivotal not only for organizational success, but for a higher normative purpose actively sought by servant leaders. Without a concerted effort towards nurturing a community-first atmosphere, individuals might have to revisit their original calling to servant leadership (Peck, 1995).

To serve a given community, the leader must be contextually aware of the moral character in which the group has been a part of and presently adheres to, always looking to strengthen positive relational bonds among members (Chamberlain, 1995). Listening to others, irrespective of their status, within an organization is paramount for fortifying these bonds as it illustrates leadership's interest in the individual contributing to the communal identity (Maxwell, 2007). Culpability is increased as individual needs are being attended to through these exchanges (Block, 2013).

Filtering the servant/steward leadership style down to its essence is placing others first. The decision to consider others and their needs before one's own epitomizes servant leadership, facilitating a culture of open-mindedness and tolerance (Belton, 2016). This reinvigorated setting allows servant leaders to freely share their principles with employees who, in turn, may practice the selfsame principles in their own lives (Sergiovanni, 2006). The cyclical spirit of service holds the power to challenge, influence, and change societal norms in an affirmative light (Spears, 2011). Firming up the selfless leader for good is Whetstone (2002), stating:

> The servant leader focuses on himself as a person and how he can beneficially serve others, whom he values for their dignity as persons, helping them to exercise freely their personal subjectivity and autonomy in a morally responsible manner. He seeks to build true community, on involving full participation and solidarity (p. 390).

Traits-Based Leadership

Characteristics attributed to leadership were frequently used to formalize the servant leadership approach. The most widely-known contribution in this regard was Spears's (1995) *Ten Characteristics of the Servant-Leader* that lists "Listening, Empathy, Healing, Awareness, Persuasion, Conceptualization, Foresight, Stewardship, Commitment to the growth of people, and Building community" as fundamental in conceptualizing servant leadership (pp. 4-7). While Spears (1995) acknowledges that his 10 characteristics "are by no means exhaustive"(p. 7), comparable assumptions on how certain traits ultimately define servant leadership have followed along similar lines. One such example is humility. The servant leader is synonymous with being a humble individual who does not heavily engage in personal accolades but redirects that energy to assist employees (Bachelder, 2015). A key trait of this humble leadership is the ability to keep one's ego in check for the sake of preserving quality relationship (Ferch, 2004). Humility is an attribute we are all capable of and one that requires a thoughtful presence starting from within us (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Being humble is a challenging but necessary leadership task for acknowledging and contemplating others' insights and perspectives even if they are divergent from one's own ideas or beliefs.

Drawing on traits to depict servant leadership was used by almost all of the explanations reviewed. The works coded under this theme were of those that specifically highlighted an

attribute or two as essential to comprehending servant leadership. Traits that were overtly used in explaining servant leadership included the acceptance and use of power in a constructive manner (Showkeir, 2002), love and its redeeming quality (Patterson, 2003; Patterson; 2010), carefully listening to others (Chamberlain, 1995 & Bachelder, 2015), the overwhelmingly selfless and meaningful act of forgiving others (Ferch, 2004; Ferch, 2008), and pursuing and nurturing wisdom for inspired leading (Lopez, 2012). Succinct but powerful in their own right, listing traits for servant leadership serves the dual purpose for informing and touching upon the moralistic behaviors expected through Greenleaf's collective treatises.

Repetitively Embracing Personal Sacrifice

The categorical themes from the coded servant leadership texts were condensed into a central theme that could be considered relational to each one. Taking into account the behaviors associated with servant leadership — such as selflessly giving of one's self for others to grow, adopting the role of steward who nourishes a sense of community, and the moralistic individual whose humility inspires those around them to follow suit — the theme that seemed to logically precede the actions of servant leadership during Greenleaf's (1977) initial call to serve as leader was whether one could repetitively embrace personal sacrifice to enact the concepts and traits associated with servant leadership itself.

Sacrifice, as defined by Halbertal (2012/2015), "refers to giving up a vital interest for a higher cause. Someone may sacrifice his property, comfort, limb, or even life for his children, country, or in order to fulfill an obligation" (p. 1). Though a servant leader will almost undoubtedly not be called to offer up his or her life, a leader will indeed be called to give expertise as well as emotional and intellectual support without reserve towards employee growth. In Greenleaf's (1977) original steps, the individual's desire to serve guides them to automatically choosing servant leadership where they begin the recurring "healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous" dialogue on employee interactions (p. 13). However, the linchpin linking the desire to serve and the actual decision to serve others in the servant leadership framework is sustainability.

In this case, sustainability comes in the form of a self-assessment where prospective leaders are asked if they have the wherewithal to repetitively embrace personal sacrifice. The servant leader would be granting employees a considerable amount of time that could be used for their own positioning and/or personal development. Thus, before placing employee needs as the primary focus, a leader would have to honestly ask, "Am I willing to embrace personal sacrifice on a continual basis to practice servant leadership? If so, how do I stay motivated to sustain the concept of putting others first? If not, is there a way to negotiate an understanding where employees are supported in the leadership approach/style I feel most comfortable using? This line of questioning has the potential to prepare leaders for executing Greenleaf's (1977) prompts on serving others with improved commitment and resolve.

Commitment in Light of Greenleaf's Questions-Based Logic

Greenleaf's (1977) questions-based logic on how a leader should develop employees undergirds servant leadership practice to its core. The cyclical nature of these inquires reminds leadership that questions must continually be asked as situations and people change over time. To further formalize the concepts developed in this paper, the following model has been created to provide a step-by-step account on its overall implementation:

Figure 1. **Application of the Pre-Committal Questions to Greenleaf's Questions-Based Logic.**

Greenleaf (1977) *Who is the Servant Leader?*	Pre-Committal Questions
1) "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (p.13)	
	2) "Am I willing to embrace personal sacrifice on a continual basis to practice servant leadership?"
	3) "If so, how do I stay motivated to sustain the concept of putting others first?"
	4) "If not, is there a way to negotiate an understanding where employees are supported in the leadership approach/style I feel most comfortable using?"
5) If willing to embrace, "Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead (as a servant leader" (p. 13)	
6) "Do those served grow as persons?" (p. 13)	
7) "Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous…etc.?" (pp. 13-14)	

Summary of Findings/Conclusions

After investigating the various definitions authors used to convey the servant leadership theory, it became increasingly evident that recurrent themes could be found across the literature and that most of the groupings intertwined to the point where some of them were interchangeable. The intersecting themes discovered in the initial coding phase (Personal Growth, Development, and Empowerment of Employees; Spiritual, Affirmational, and Ethically-Minded Approach toward Employees; Steward Dedicated to Service of Community and Placing Others First; and Traits-Based Leadership) gave way to forming the central theme of Repetitively Embracing Personal Sacrifice. From this core theme, three questions for potential servant leaders to weigh upon before committing themselves to servant leadership were introduced:

- Am I willing to embrace personal sacrifice on a continual basis to practice servant leadership?
- If so, how do I stay motivated to sustain the concept of putting others first?
- If not, is there a way to negotiate an understanding where employees are supported in the leadership approach/style I feel most comfortable using?

These self-assessing questions were used to connect Greenleaf's (1977) call to serve and the final decision of becoming a servant leader.

Servant leadership is not an exact science nor was it ever promoted as such by Greenleaf in his numerous writings. With that said, as servant leadership continues its upward climb in popularity and practice, providing theoretical and contextual breadth for comprehending servant leadership theory becomes vital for its general applicability. The proposed questions on whether one should personally commit to the servant leadership approach puts a necessary structure in place for scrutinizing servant leadership theory against in a systematic and consistent manner.

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Dr. Henry J. Davis is the Academic Program Specialist for High-Impact Practices (HIP) for the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at CUNY Queensborough Community College (QCC). Prior to his appointment at QCC, he served in an administrative capacity with Fordham University's Graduate School of Social Service and as an Adjunct Professor with Fordham's Graduate School of Education. In the past year, Dr. Davis presented his work entitled *Adapting the Core Values of Servant Leadership to Academic Advising* at the *15th Annual Conference on Innovative Pedagogy and Course Redesign* at Fairfield University in Fairfield, CT. Dr. Davis's research interests include servant leadership theory and assessing HIPs in higher education.

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Appendix A

Table of Coded Servant Leadership Groupings from Texts

Personal Growth, Development, and Empowerment of Employees
Graham, 1995; McGee-Cooper & Trammell, 1995; Spears, 1995; Graham, 1998; Lore, 1998; McCollum, 1998; Farling, Stone & Winston, 1999; Blanchard, 2001; McGee-Cooper & Trammell, 2001; Blanchard, 2002; McGee-Cooper & Trammell, 2002; Russell & Stone, 2002; Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2003; Wong & Page, 2003; Autry, 2004; Carver, 2004; De Graaf, Tilley & Neal, 2004; Smith, Montagno & Kuzmenko, 2004; Sipe & Frick, 2009; Ebener & O'Connell, 2010; Spears, 2010; van Dierendonck & Rook, 2010; Block, 2011; Ferch, 2011; Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011; Block, 2013; Bachelder, 2015.

Spiritual, Affirmational and Ethically-Inclined Leadership
Graham, 1995; Peck, 1995; Senge, 1995; Spears, 1995; Rinehart, 1998; Schuster, 1998; Page & Wong, 2000; Autry, 2001; Fryar, 2001; Dupree, 2002; Freeman, Isaksen & Dorval, 2002; Jones, 2002; Wheatley, 2002; Whetstone, 2002; Blanchard & Hodges, 2003; Patterson, 2003; Ferch, 2004; Wheatley, 2004; Wheatley, 2005; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2006; Blanchard & Hodges, 2008; Ferch, 2008; Sipe & Frick, 2009; Ferch, 2010; Patterson, 2010; Rinehart, 1998; Sendjaya, 2010; Autry, 2011; Ferch, 2011; Lopez, 2012; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015.

Steward Dedicated to Serving Community and Placing Others First
Dupree, 1989; Senge, 1990; Chamberlain, 1995; McGee-Cooper & Trammell, 1995; Peck, 1995; Spears, 1995; Tarr, 1995; Tatuna, 1995; Vanourek, 1995; Jeffries, 1998; Laub, 1999; Dupree, 2002; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Whetston, 2003; Blanchard & Hodges, 2003; Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2003; De Graaf, Tilley & Neal, 2004; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Maxwell, 2007; Sergiovanni, 2006; Blanchard & Hodges, 2008; Sipe & Frick, 2009; Laub, 2010; Spears, 2010; van Dierendonck & Rook, 2010; Spears, 2011; Keith, 2012; Block, 2013; Bachelder, 2015, Belton, 2016.

Traits-Based Leadership
Chamberlain, 1995; Spears, 1995; Bausch, 1998; Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Stone & Winston, 1999; Vanourek, 1995; Autry, 2001; Braye, 2002; Dupree, 2002; Freeman, Isaksen & Dorval, 2002; McGee-Cooper & Trammell, 2002; Mercedes-Smith & Farnsworth, 2002; Showkeir, 2002; Whetstone, 2002; Zohar, 2002; Blanchard & Hodges, 2003; Ferch, 2004; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Maxwell, 2007; Blanchard & Hodges, 2008; Ferch, 2008; Jackson, 2008; Sipe & Frick, 2009; Ebener & O'Connell, 2010; Ferch, 2010; Spears, 2010; van Dierendonck & Rook, 2010; Ferch, 2011; Ferch, 2011; Hayes & Comer, 2012; Lopez, 2012; Block, 2013; Bachelder, 2015, van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015; Belton 2016.