

Servant Leadership - Master by Name and Servant by Action

Mamata Mahapatra*, Hamida Virani**

Abstract

The wisdom of organisational leadership is adding new vistas on a continuum with enriched and applied research explorations for enhancing organisation effectiveness. It seems the golden saying 'nothing is permanent' seems to be very true as far as the arena of the organisational leadership is concerned in the global competitive scenario. This quote, without saying, highlights the corporate relationship of yesterday and today. There was a time when employees were treated like slaves. Today the time has changed and this changed time has also changed the leadership pattern which has evolved the concept of 'servant leadership'. In short, this concept by Robert Greenleaf (1977) emphasized on nurturing, defending and empowering followers as the prime responsibility of a leader/manager to pertain organisational effectiveness.

Aligning to the above, the present research paper is an honest attempt to focus the utility of the concept of 'servant leadership' and 'change in employee - employer relationship' with change in time. The extensive literature reviews followed by the interview analysis of six of the leaders-cum-managers in the corporate as well as private business organisations in the states of West Bengal and Gujarat are incorporated in the research papers. Real life interview analysis on application of servant leadership gives a glimpse of change in leadership style with change in time and importance of servant leadership in today's competitive time.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Interview Analysis, Business Organizations

Introduction

The journey of organisational leadership has passed through many phases of developments in terms of both theory and practice for managing the organisations successfully in the era of globalisation. So, the wisdom of organisational leadership is adding new vistas on a continuum with enriched and applied research explorations for enhancing organisation effectiveness. Emphasizing the importance of organisational leadership in the present scenario, Mr Narayan Murty in a talk addressing to the Wharton MBA class rightly pointed out, "Leadership, therefore, is all about rising aspirations of the followers. It is about making people believe in themselves; it is about making them confident; and it is about making people achieve miracles" (Ohtaki & Bucknall, 2006). The statement seems to be indicating more towards 'servant leadership' which is adding another novel dimension of knowledge in the field of organisational management in the competitive world of work. This is a paradigm shift of thought in the mind of present managers/ leaders from the ingrained attitude of a master by name to servant by action. The concept was coined by Robert Greenleaf (1970), became popular in a leadership context after his book, 'Servant Leadership' (1977) which emphasized on nurturing, defending and empowering followers as the prime responsibility of a leader/ manager to pertain organisational effectiveness. These ideas about servant leadership were recognised in the leadership literature for many year, but they did not elicit much attention until recently (Graham, 1991; Russell & Stone, 2002; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Smith *et al.*, 2004).

* Associate Professor, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India. Email: mmahapatra86@yahoo.co.in

** HR Manager, Hotel 'Quality Inn', Georgia, USA. Email: hamidavirani1@gmail.com

In general, 'any leader who serves' for very much longer period is a servant. The pages of world history is depicting the success stories of the servant leaders in various fields with national and international repute, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela to name a few. The industrialists and businessmen like Tata, Dhirubhai Ambani, and Bill Gates also offer the characterisations of servant leaders philosophy along with their service-oriented business acumen.

Colleen Barrett, President Emerita and Corporate Secretary of Southwest Airlines wrote in her Article, titled 'Servant Leadership' about practices of Herb Keller, Chairman and CEO of the same airline. She very well mentioned that Herb Keller pioneered their legendary approach to customer service, which aims to treat their 35,000 employees like family, to make the workplace fun-and carry that upbeat attitude to customers. Further Keller himself said, "My style is one of servant leadership (the Robert Greenleaf notion)".

To deliberate on practice of servant leadership concept in Indian work organisations, the present paper is a sincere effort by the researchers aligning with the above introductory foundation on the aspect of servant leadership and attempt to explore its perspective implacability in small business and corporate sector organisations' leadership through qualitative interview research analysis.

Review of Literature

Numerous researches were conducted on the aspect of servant leadership and its relationship with other leadership types in practice in managing corporate and other work organisations.

Most of the evidence about effects of servant leadership is from anecdotal accounts and case studies of historical leaders (e.g., Graham, 1991). Herbert (2005) from a conceptual study found out that servant leadership is gaining attention as a radical way to lead organisations successfully while empowering individuals through service. The old paradigm of top-down management has been upended; employees are given more freedom to do their jobs while leaders serve them to success.

Smith (2005) conducted a conceptual study on servant leadership proposed by Robert K. Greenleaf (1970) and found out that servant leadership is evaluated term of transformational leadership. Washington *et al.* (2006)

conducted a survey on 288 followers and 126 leaders in three organisations, to measure the relationships between followers' ratings of leaders' servant leadership, followers' ratings of leaders' values of empathy, integrity, and competence, and leaders' ratings of their own agreeableness. As a result, it was found that servant leadership has positive impact on the followers.

Valeri (2007) using an historical, inductive analysis of western civilisation, found that the origins of servant leadership can indeed be traced back to at least 2500 years ago, starting in ancient Greece and Rome. Ideally, servant leadership flourishes most naturally in democratic institutional environments, and from the inner work, that servant leaders voluntarily choose to take on in their journeys through life. Its source is not egoism but a selfless regard for others. It depends on followers who seek to know the answers to the following questions: servants of what and servants of whom? In many fundamental respects, servant leadership echoes the insights of James Mac Gregor Burn's transforming leadership. In essence, it is primarily a form of moral leadership.

Beck (2010) conducted quantitative and qualitative survey to explore the antecedents of servant leadership. The phase one quantitative survey collected data from 499 leaders and 630 ratters from community leadership programmes in the United States using the servant leadership questionnaire (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). During phase two, selected leaders from phase one (N = 12) were interviewed to explain those results in depth. The data were coded and analysed for possible themes. Triangulation was used to analyse the quantitative and qualitative data to validate the findings of the data collected. Six key findings emerged from the data: (a) the longer a leader is in a leadership role, the more frequent is the servant leader behaviour; (b) leaders that volunteer at least one hour per week demonstrate higher servant leader behaviours; (c) servant leaders influence others through building trusting relationships; (d) servant leaders demonstrate an altruistic mind set; (e) servant leaders are characterised by interpersonal competence; and (f) a servant leader may not necessarily lead from the front, or the top of the organisation.

Brewer (2010) conducted a conceptual study and found that the application of servant leadership principles creates increased job satisfaction and improves organisational productivity. Melchar and Bosco (2010) investigated

whether a servant leader can develop a corporate culture that attracts or develops other servant leaders. Using the survey developed by Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), servant leader characteristics in managers were measured at three high-performing organisations. Results indicate that servant leaders can develop a culture of followers who are servant leaders themselves. This was one of the few studies to empirically test the model of servant leadership in an organisational environment. The model of servant leadership, as proposed by Robert Greenleaf (1977) especially suited to providing employees with the empowerment and participatory job characteristics that are related to both employee and customer satisfaction. Greenleaf suggested that the leaders who are profit oriented and need demanding environment of work exhibit servant leadership style. It is viable for adoption by other firms also.

Freeman (2011) conducted a conceptual study on servant leadership and found the concept of spirituality, and its effect on the formation and effectiveness of servant leadership. He also proposed conceptual model on servant leadership which postulates spiritual beliefs (e.g., hope and faith in God) as a causal factor in the formation of a servant leader's values and behaviours. Furthermore, the model posits that spiritual practices (e.g., praying, meditating, and reading scripture) are a moderating variable of servant leadership behaviour and the outcome variable, leadership effectiveness, as perceived by followers. The paper reveals hypothesized relationships between four variables (leader's spiritual belief as independent variable, leader's servant leadership behaviour as mediating variable, leader's effectiveness perceived by followers as dependent variable, and leader's spiritual practices as moderating variable) and proposes methods for measuring and testing the propositions. Hess (2013) conducted a conceptual study and concluded that servant leadership is a path of high performance.

Objectives of the Study

The research paper is based on the following objectives:

1. To review the importance of servant leadership through in-depth conceptual analysis base.
2. To study the possibilities of application of servant leadership approach in managing employees in both corporate and entrepreneurial work organisations today.

3. To project the in-depth live interview analysis of one of the experienced corporate professional-cum-project director and vice-president of a reputed private sector organisation on the practise of servant leadership.
4. To project the in-depth live interview analysis of four reputed, successful and experienced entrepreneurs on the practise of servant leadership.
5. To review the broad based usability of the servant leadership approach for managing different work organisations effectively.

Interview Analysis

The authors have conducted in-depth live interview sessions by meeting personally the corporate leaders in the cadre of 'Senior Vice President & Director' and four entrepreneurs in private sector. Four questions covering the different aspects of application of servant leadership concept in both corporate and service organisations were selectively chosen for the interview purpose. The profile and the excerpts of the interview are as follows:

Profile of the Leaders considered for Interview

Corporate Leader

1. Mr. Bivekananda Mishra, Project Director and Vice President of ESSAR Project, based at Durgapur, West Bengal, is a mechanical Engineer from NIT, Rourkela (Odisha) and PGDM, AIMA (New Delhi), with 37 years' enriched experience in execution of mega projects in India and overseas in hydrocarbon, steel and fertiliser sector. In his current position, he is responsible for implementation of green field matrix fertiliser project. With project cost of INR 5000 Cr, he employed 3500 workers at the peak. Under his able guidance, the project is 97% complete and will be ready for commissioning by next quarter. He practices transformational, ethical, and servant leadership in planning and execution of mega projects in India and abroad in a true sense.

Question Specific Excerpts

What is your view on the practise of servant leadership in your organisation?

I strongly believe in practising servant leadership qualities

in my long years of experience of project leadership in various organisations, as it creates a positive atmosphere of working in construction sites specially. I inculcate the positive feeling by practising the servant leadership principles because when you help others, your same positive feeling vibrates supportive atmosphere in the project. As a result, supportive atmosphere is automatically created which becomes conducive atmosphere for all team members to work by becoming enjoyable and stress free for all.

Do you think a culture of trust is essential or practising servant leadership? How?

In my opinion, trust and confidence on subordinates/employees are the most essential parameters for any leader to work. This creates an atmosphere of confidence and trust within the team members and dependability and confidence among team members becomes very high. Again, because of high empathising atmosphere the team members feel like working in a family atmosphere, though they are away from the home.

Do you think the characteristics like humility, love, affection, empathy empowerment, etc. are necessary to practise servant leadership? Why?

The characteristics of empathy, humility, fairness and justice, integrity and empowerment, in short, motivate the employees in my work of managing mega industrial construction projects. This is important specifically for me to keep my self-motivation very high because the organisation is situated in a remote location. The employees have to work for 12 hours a day and have to stay away from family, near and dear ones. Secondly, organisations also get benefit as all team members properly align with each other for organisational goals. Whenever required, they don't mind overstretching themselves for the organisational goals by putting in their best efforts. As a result, the task becomes enjoyable, instead of tedious. Their team spirit inspire me too many a times. A role model for a team should positively influence not only professional life, but also their social life to a great extent.

Do you think servant leadership is the perfect leadership style to cope with this competitive business environment?

Yes, very much. The servant leadership qualities of caring, loving, and considering the juniors as family members are essential, specifically for driving the construction

projects. This project now I am heading is a labour and union sensitive place. So, many a times, besides the work pressure, I and my team have to handle several labour disputes, late meetings, demonstrations, strikes, wage settlement, statutory audits. Without showing the true qualities of a servant leader influence, do you think I can ever cope with this uncertainty work environment? I strongly believe that setting servant leadership culture prevents my team members from social vices and other immoral activities. Further, I believe to fully empower all the team supervisors to inculcate servant leadership attitude to micro plan their own team activities for performing the assigned task. This helps the team members for contributing their best.

Entrepreneurs' Profile

(a) **Mr. Jalal Virani, an iron scrap merchant with ownership and headship of the business**, based in Valsad and residence in Surat, Gujarat, has pursued his academic study till matriculation and further pursued a course on electronics repairing. After gaining knowledge on the same, Mr. Virani started working as an electric mechanic. After spending few years in the job, he entered business world as an 'entrepreneur'. Mr. Virani has 35 years of experience as a passionate entrepreneur to his credit and he has managed skilfully various issues related to employees with his servant leadership skills, in particular.

(b) **Mr. Alnoor Virani, an iron scrap merchant**, business based in Valsad and residence in Surat, Gujarat, has completed his high school and joined his family business along with his father, Mr. Jalal Virani. So far, Mr. Alnoor Virani has got 10 years of experience in the same business and has gained expertise in tackling various employees' issues occurring at the workplace under his leadership. He strongly favours servant leadership and is an ambitious entrepreneur by heart.

Question Specific Excerpts

What is your view on the practise of servant leadership in your organisation?

Mr. Jalal Virani and Mr. Alnoor Virani expressed that today any relationship is built on only one expectation, i.e. 'give and take'. It is important that when you expect some efforts or say extra efforts from your workers, they won't be available for you for free. Therefore, it

has become a prime duty or rather a must for business leaders today to treat the workers like their boss because only if the bottom level exists, you as a top level are there! Without pampering the workers, it has become very difficult in today's competitive world to maintain the labour retention in any unorganised sector. Thus, they say, servant leadership helps the leader in the business to attain its goals and productivity by creating a win-win situation at workplace.

Do you think a culture of trust is essential for practising servant leadership? How?

We both strongly believe that trust is the essential foundation of any relationship, may it be personal or professional. As the godown is 80 kms away from our place of residence, it is impossible that we can look upon the workers every moment. The only means of communication to connect with the workers at the godown is mobile phone, so it is not possible to see whether the workers are following the orders or are undertaking the work assigned. Most of the time we have to rely on manager's information about the development of work. At times, such culture of trust helps the labour class to push ahead and work in absence of the leader. As a result, the timely work is undertaken and productivity increases. Thus, business goals can be accomplished easily.

Do you think the characteristics like humility, love, affection, empathy empowerment, etc. are necessary to practise servant leadership? Why?

Both the entrepreneurs expressed that servant leadership is a kind of emotional tool via which workers' emotional level is taken care of and in return, they are asked to serve you directly or indirectly. The *owner* entrepreneur further added, these days competition is highly increasing, workers working with you expect love, respect, certain extent of empowerment, other than wages/salary. It is very necessary that these demands are rightly fulfilled by you as a leader, otherwise it becomes difficult to retain them which will ultimately affect your productivity.

Do you think servant leadership is the perfect leadership style to cope with this competitive business environment?

Both Viranis depicted that the idea of perfect leadership style keeps on changing with the era. There is no single leadership style which can be considered as a perfect leadership style. Of course, they agree with the fact that

in today's era, servant leadership serves the best to cope with the competitive business environment to achieve the goal. They further mentioned that the main reason behind this kind of leadership is scarcity of semi-skilled workers. Moreover, certain government rules and regulations for them have made them more powerful and demanding as several other options are now opened for them. This creates competition within themselves and their sustainability becomes uncertain. Hence, it has become important to serve them and fulfil their demands, if one has to take a good care of his business entity.

Mr. Ramdas Nishad is a home decorator and a family entrepreneur, based in Bardoli (Gujarat). Without having the formal education, Mr. Nishad started his own business of home décor after gaining guidance from his elder brother and getting a financial aid from one of his friends, Mr. Nanubhai Patel. He is practising the art of servant leadership ardently, which attracts the employees (semi-skilled) to retain for a long period of time.

Question Specific Excerpts

What is your view on the practise of servant leadership in your organisation?

I firmly believe that if a top level person wants to get successful, the simple key is to keep their workers/employees happy. If the workers at the work are satisfied, the customers will be satisfied and thus, I treat my workers like a valuable asset and fulfil all their needs, desire, and help them whenever situation demands. Hence, I consider that servant leadership serves best to a leader in this world of competition.

Do you think a culture of trust is essential for practising servant leadership? How?

I have gone through all the hardships of life and seen life from its ground reality. My life has never been spoon-fed with a silver spoon. I, being one among like the workers, always remember the old struggling days and believe that everybody deserves to be treated with respect. Apart from having a personal connection, I feel that without trust a business cannot be taken forward to its ultimate motive. Trust is the base of any relationship, and so it serves the employee and employer relationship too.

Do you think the characteristics like humility, love, affection, empathy empowerment, etc. are necessary to practise servant leadership? Why?

Servant leadership itself means to treat the workers with humility and empathy. Again, it is only because of these characteristics, servant leadership concept has gained a lot to its credit. Thus, one cannot be said to be practising servant leadership if they neglect the above-mentioned characteristics. The main strategy is to empower the semi-skilled workers who mainly drive my home décor business since last 20 years in a competitive atmosphere.

Do you think servant leadership is the perfect leadership style to cope with this competitive business environment?

I firmly agree that hiring semi-skilled workers is a difficult task in today's competitive environment. In such a cut-throat situation, it is only my love, care, affection towards these workers that can only serve my purpose as a leader to retain them and get the work done timely.

Ms. Payal Dani is a fashion designer, based in Surat, Gujarat. She has completed her academic studies till matriculation and joined INIFD (Surat) for her further career prospect. She has been a part of almost 30 exhibitions in Surat, Gujarat as well as in Mumbai, Maharashtra. Presently she runs her own boutique named "POP'S – The Fashion Lounge". Under her guidance, there are 4 to 5 workers working for different tailoring & other related work. She is a young and aspiring entrepreneur with 3 years of experience in her field.

Question Specific Excerpts

What is your view on the practise of servant leadership in your organisation?

I, as a young entrepreneur, firmly believe that it is important in today's competitive, fragile fashion business world to take care of the workers like family members. Gone are the days when the head of the unit ordered and the subordinates followed quietly. Today the relationship between the head and the subordinates has changed vastly. Everybody needs to be tackled with dignity and respect. Moreover, I need the workers with the strong aptitude towards tailoring. Hence, I have to deal with them with the attitude of a servant leader, then only it works as magic.

Do you think a culture of trust is essential for practising servant leadership? How?

Yes, it is only trust that helps to get the work done by workers. Culture in any sole proprietor ownership firm or any multinational company is formed through top

management. I being aware of this fact very well know the tactics to get the work done from my workers. See, I have my boutique on Ghod Dod Road (one of the posh area in Surat, Gujarat) and my workstation is situated at Citylight Road (another posh area in Surat, Gujarat). Dealing from one place to another without being physically present is often risky when it comes to dealing with workers. Making this situation an opportunity, I have made one of the worker a 'Head Master' of all the other workers. Doing so has successfully cultivated a culture of trust in my boutique and efficiently developed another leader under my leadership which shows that culture of trust plays an essential part in practising servant leadership.

Do you think the characteristics like humility, love, affection, empathy empowerment, etc. are necessary to practise servant leadership? Why?

I have to keep my eyes and ears open all the time in this competitive market of fashion designing. Keeping the competition in mind, I know that in order to gain maximum benefits in long term from my workers, it is important that I continuously motivate, encourage, and show humility, love and affection to them. I have to take care of them like my family members. At times, I send home-cooked food to them which gives an emotional touch to the relation. Such small gestures made by me make my work of dealing with those workers easy as this makes them think that I care for them. Such amicable behaviour at workplace encourages them to work better every day which ultimately benefits me to establish a relationship bond to satisfy the demands of high class customers specifically.

Do you think servant leadership is the perfect leadership style to cope with this competitive business environment?

Yes, servant leadership can only serve the best of its purposes and I agree that a servant leader is the perfect leader to cope with this competitive business environment of fashion designing.

Suggestions for Implementations

The following implacable suggestions can be drawn on the basis of the in-depth interview analysis on a qualitative note. The suggestions are drawn unanimously by the five leaders in the field of corporate sector and private entrepreneurship organisations respectively.

- Establishing genuine trust along with care, affection, emotional support in the mind of the subordinates/ employees is the prime characteristic to drive servant leaders. Emphasizing on building a culture of trust between the employees and the entrepreneur, the reputed fashion designer-cum-owner said, "Trust factor has come out as the prime requirement on the part of a leader without which a firm relationship between the employees and the employers can never be established. Dealing at a place without being physically present there is often risky when it comes to dealing with workers. Making this situation an opportunity, I have made one of the worker a 'Head Master' of all the other workers. Doing so has successfully cultivated a culture of trust in my boutique and efficiently developed another leader under my leadership which shows that culture of trust plays an essential part in practising servant leadership". All the leaders have unanimously accepted that establishing firm 'trust' in the subordinates can ascertain the retention of employees and that's what only a servant leader is able to exist.
- It is very important on the part of any leader to act as a model figure for inculcating the basic servant leadership qualities in his/ her action, then the same will be set up as the culture trend in due course of time. Projecting 'empathy' towards the subordinates has been accepted as one of the utmost qualities of a servant leader. All the leaders have openly accepted this quality to drive the organisations to long term success. Aligned to the above analysis, Robert K. Greenleaf, the pioneer of servant leadership, writes, "People grow taller when those who lead them empathise and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathise and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted".
- The leadership qualities practised by the above leaders projected 'servant leadership seems to be the effective leadership style to cope with the global competitive business environment in the country.

To support to the above practical suggestions of the qualitative analysis,

Margaret Wheatley, while giving a keynote address on the occasion of annual conference of Robert K. Greenleaf

Centre for Servant Leadership, June 1999 declared that our organisations need more servant leaders, since they represent the future without them, the best of what is possible won't happen. The speech seems to be very much applicable for our future leaders and for practising servant leadership in a true sense.

Conclusion

Last but not the least, the characteristics of servant leadership are very much reflected in our work organisation leadership. It further invites to focus on a concrete research-oriented approach for identification so that they will be able to retain the talented and the committed employees in organisations which is the need of the hour.

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