Universality of Servant Leadership

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Abstract
Servant leadership is increasingly being tested, and proven to be a viable tool for managing multi-cultural organizations. Existing empirical and conceptual studies on servant leadership suggest that this leadership construct is practicable. While a lot of studies seem to have investigated its effect on individuals' and organizations' outcomes, none has moved the motion that servant leadership might have universal connotations. This conceptual paper explores the underpinning framework of the universality dimension of servant leadership, and why viewing the construct as such, is necessary now and in the near future. By critically examining past and present literature on servant leadership, the paper offers robust and useful insights needed to stimulate the universality debate of servant leadership. The implications of the paper for early career researchers were also discussed.

Keywords: servant leadership, universality, ethical leadership, transformational leadership, spiritual leadership

Introduction

In an attempt to advance research on servant leadership, the maiden edition of journal of Servant Leadership: Theory and Practice (SLTP), volume 1, issue 1 was published in August 2014. While critics of the concept might struggle to see the need to establish yet another journal publication on servant leadership, apart from the *International Journal of Servant Leadership*, supporters might see this as a giant stride. One that is long overdue and, capable of giving the construct profound recognition in academia. This giant stride

suggests mean two things, particularly for early career researchers. First, servant leadership is arguably not just another management fad, which is expected to fade away sooner or later as the years go by, neither is it an "epistemological fairytale" (Wacquant, 2002, p. 1481) as observed from the numerous research (Carroll & Patterson, 2014; de Waal & Sivro, 2012; Peterson, Galvin, & Lange, 2012) that have explored this leadership construct.

These studies have were able to establish the significance of servant leadership in terms of fostering positive work-related behavioural outcomes both at the individual (Searle & Barbuto, 2011; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), and organizational levels (Hale & Fields, 2007; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Searle & Barbuto, 2011). Secondly, based on its relative significance in both academia and in practice, servant leadership has become a way of life (Ferch, 2005; Wallace, 2007, 2011). Clearly demonstrating that, the construct is not only practiced in the workplace alone, but that it is manifested in individuals' everyday life's activities. Servant leadership therefore, describes a situation where leaders' ultimate priority rests in their ability to serve others (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009; Wheeler, 2011).

It strongly advocates enhancing employees' commitment, trust and confidence, as being key towards achieving organizational goals (Joseph & Winston, 2005; Miao, Newman, Schwarz, & Xu, 2014; Mittal & Dorfman, 2012; Patterson, 2003; Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008), while at the same time, seeking a balance between serving the interests of organizations' internal and external customers. According to Greenleaf (1970) the goal of servant leaders goes beyond merely serving the needs of followers, to ensuring that followers themselves are well developed to the extent of wanting to become servant leaders themselves. Building upon these definitions, servant leadership is defined in this paper as an all-inclusive, dynamic and on-going leadership construct where a leader's inclination to lead is born out of his/her desire to serve others.

It is considered all-inclusive for having the ability to combine features of traditional leadership theories, often characterized by power and authority and, relational leadership theories. At the same time, servant leaders strive to pursue the interest of an organization and its stakeholders, not just the leaders but that everyone in the organization is expected to pursue others' interests before self-interests. While its dynamism is based on the understanding that servant leaders are expected to reproduce themselves in the organization by way of developing more servant leaders to succeed them. In doing so, the underlying assumptions of the construct are fully maintained and sustained. Whereas, as an on-going process, servant leadership is seen as a way of life, and an act of doing!

The numerous conceptual and empirical studies, determining the impact of servant leadership on individuals and organizations' performance, have given scholars the impetus to comprehend this leadership construct. Insights from these studies indicate that the construct has universal connotations. Specifically, certain principles of servant leadership such as vision, humility and service were found visible when applied in different organizations and societies (Hale & Fields, 2007). Viewing it from a universal dimension suggests that, servant leadership is neither organization nor country-specific. Following this line of argument, researchers have explored the construct across various subject areas and context, ranging from private and public (Chacksfield, 2014; Han, Kakabadse, & Kakabadse, 2010; Laub et al., 1999; Nazarpoori & Kalani, 2014; Walker & Nsiah, 2013; Wheeler, 2011), profit and not-for-profit organizations (Sarros, Cooper, & Santora, 2011; Shirin, 2014).

Despite the plethora of research on servant leadership, the universality dimension of the construct is yet to gain significant recognition. Till date, there remains a dearth of research exploring the construct from a universal point of view, which this conceptual paper seeks to address. By critically examining servant leadership and comparing it to contemporary

leadership theories, the paper locates key principles of servant leadership across differing cultural and organizational settings, with a view of identifying servant leadership principles that are common in these cultures/organizations. The paper adopts a systematic review of extant literature in examining why servant leadership should be viewed as a universal leadership construct now, and in the near future.

Servant Leadership: An Overview

Similar to the situational leadership theory, servant leadership is devoid of a one-best way of leading. Instead, it is made up of varying numbers of inter-dependent principles (also known as characteristics). Historically, this leadership construct uniquely combines the ideas of self-less and quality service, to people-centred leadership styles (Page & Wong, 2000). The uniqueness of the construct lies in its emphasis on viewing "service as a prerequisite to leading" (Wheeler, 2011, p. xv) and, that leadership only emerges in the process of rendering service to others. Even though the servant hood idea existed long ago, particularly among clerics in religious and philosophical circles, it became formally recognized in academia from the works of Robert Greenleaf in the early '70s (Laub et al., 1999; Parris & Peachey, 2013; Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009).

The idea can be traced back to the activities of how founders of major religions, human right activists, as well as great philosophers of old, related with their followers. Jesus Christ and Prophet Mohammed, as well as most human rights activists such as Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. have at some point in time adopted this philosophy. The New International Version (NIV) of the Bible records an account in the book of John chapter 13 verses 13-17, where Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, an attitude which reflected humility and service to his disciples, by washing their feet, he demonstrated that true and enduring greatness can only be attained by being humble and serving the needs of

one's followers as a leader. In other words, a master can still be great even if he or she performs the duties of a servant and not that of a master, which in effect defines the essence of servant leadership.

Aristotle, the great philosopher, also stated that life is meaningless unless its purpose is "to serve others and do good" (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009 p. 6). These simple acts of kindness express the guiding principles of servant leadership. Servant leadership therefore, is a leadership ideology that encourages leaders to serve the needs of subordinates, and by ensuring that this attitude guides every decisions they make in the organization (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Greenleaf wrote his first essay titled '*the servant as leader*' in an attempt to investigate the role of a servant. This was where he outlined key principles of servant leadership, which include listening, empathy, foresight, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization and emotional healing, and how to become a servant leader (Greenleaf, 1970). He argued that, a true servant leader is one who is able to adopt one or more of these principles.

Over the years, the numbers of these principles seemed to have varied among researchers. But essentially, they include empowerment, authenticity, humility, accountability, courage, stewardship, encouraging subordinates' decision-making and empathy (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Greenleaf (1970) emphasized that service to people ought to be the driving force of true and dedicated leadership, which is where servant leadership draws similarity with relational leadership theories like transformational leadership, ethical leadership, and spiritual leadership. The next section of this paper seeks to address the distinctiveness of each of these theories, clarifies how they overlap with servant leadership, before moving on to examine the impact of the construct on organizations' performance.

Servant Leadership and Related Leadership Theories

Research (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009) had traced the notion of universality to transformational, ethical and spiritual leadership theories. Essentially as these leadership theories advocate for the empowerment and improvement of subordinates and societal welfare. Transformational leadership focuses on enhancing subordinates' trust and commitment towards realizing organizations' goals (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Stone et al., 2004). Supporters (Bass, 1997; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Bass & Riggio, 2012; Mannheim & Halamish, 2008) of transformational leadership believe that leaders can improve organizational performance by enabling subordinates to optimize their skills and competencies.

Transformational leadership is similar to servant leadership by advocating for the growth and development of subordinates, but they differ in their point of emphasis. Transformational leadership relies more on leaders to achieve organizational outcomes, than the subordinates. Its undue emphasis on leaders is seen as a major drawback of transformational leadership theory. Whereas, servant leaders pay greater attention to serving subordinates' interests than their own interest in order to pursue desired outcomes in the organization (Humphreys, 2005). Ethical leadership on the other hand, is defined as the "demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120).

Supporters (Bass & Avolio, 1993) of this leadership theory believe that every leadership situation has some form of ethical connotations. Like ethical leadership theory, servant leadership also has ethical connotations, which allows it to function effectively in different

societies (Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges, Dastmalchian, & House, 2012; Mittal & Dorfman, 2012). Both ethical and servant leadership theories were found effective when applied in different organizational settings (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012). The overarching philosophy of the two theories rests in the leaders' inclination to serve others, rather than wanting to be served. They suggest that the leader-follower dyad is mediated much more by social factors, than economic factors (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Harrison III, 2013).

But, while ethical leadership focuses on improving organizational outcomes, servant leadership emphasis is on subordinates' welfare (Stone et al., 2004). Servant leaders believe that organizational performance can be improved by empowering subordinates to perform at optimal levels (Spears, 1996). This is one major distinguishing factor between servant leadership and other contemporary/service-oriented leadership theories. Ironically, unlike other leadership theories, the main emphasis of servant leadership is not on the acquisition of power, but on using power to serve other peoples' interests (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009).

Leading ethically therefore, describes the ability for leaders to rely on morality (right and wrong conducts of practice) to inspire and promote positive work-related behaviour among subordinates (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Though issues of morality and fairness are understood and interpreted differently by people from different backgrounds and societies. They are rather subject to leaders'/followers' ethical orientations on right and wrong behavioural patterns, and where both parties stand with regards to the universalism/relativism debate on ethics. Ethical and servant leadership are both premised on the timeless philosophy of *doing unto others what you want others do unto you*!

Similar to ethical and transformational leadership theories, proponents of spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003, 2009; Fry, Hannah, Noel, & Walumbwa, 2011; Fry & Nisiewicz,

2013) believe in the divine connection between work and spirituality. These researchers are of the opinion that, man needs to care for the inner being as much as the physical being as both help towards maximizing man's potentials. Research (Fry et al., 2011) has shown that spiritual leadership impacts organizational outcomes and that, like servant leadership, spiritual leadership is also service-driven and service-oriented. While all the four leadership theories suggest a relational and moral approach towards addressing subordinates' needs, each adopts a different approach at addressing the subject of leadership.

Interestingly, both transformational and ethical leadership have universal implications even though codes of conduct sometimes differ from society to society (Bass, 1997; Brown & Treviño, 2006). Unlike servant leadership, ethical leadership seems to place more emphasis on organizational outcomes than on employees' growth and development. Servant leaders, on the other hand, view such outcomes as by-products of subordinates' commitments, trust, and dedication (Graham, 1991; Humphreys, 2005; Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009; Liden et al., 2008). The next section of the paper examines the link between servant leadership and its impact on employees and the organization.

Servant Leadership and Organizational Performance

Quite a number of studies (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Van Dierendonck, 2011) have investigated the impact of servant leadership on organizations' performance. These studies were able to establish that a positive relationship exist between servant leadership and organizations' performance. One of such studies, conducted by Reinke (2004), surveyed 651 employees in Georgia, USA. The aim was to know the relationship between servant leadership and trust between supervisors and subordinates. Data was collected and empirically analyzed and, the preliminary results

revealed that stewardship; a key characteristic of servant leadership, was found to have stimulated trust between employees and their supervisors. However, servant leadership was not directly linked to organizational performance. Reinke's argument was that since the overall organizations' performance is an aggregate of all employees' performance, whatever enhances individual employees' performance, will eventually reflect in the overall performance of the organization.

Hale and Fields (2007), on the other hand, explored the servant leadership-organizations' performance linkage using the dimensions of culture from Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) project. They conducted a cross-cultural study in Ghana and USA to determine how three key servant leadership characteristics: humility, vision and service, enhances leadership effectiveness in different organizational settings. The sample consisted of 157 followers working in different types of organizations, of which 60 were from Ghana while the remaining 97 came from United States. Results from the study revealed that, while humility and service were unconnected to leadership effectiveness in the two countries, vision had a strong effect on leadership effectiveness predominantly in Ghana. The reason for this difference was that power distance among leaders in Ghana was far greater than leaders in the US.

Likewise, Liden et al. (2008) sampled 182 students and employees in an organization to verify the effect of servant leadership on firms' performance, with a view of developing a multidimensional instrument with which servant leadership characteristics can be evaluated and measured. Data was collected from students, supervisors and subordinates, and the two-phased study revealed that servant leadership improves employees' commitment to an organization. Specifically, three characteristics of servant leadership identified as employees' commitment to the organization, between-role performances, and organizational citizenship behaviour, were found to have improved firms' performance via

employees.

In a similar study, Trompenaars and Voerman (2009) developed a straight-line Likert scale with which two opposing characteristics of servant leadership; serving and leading, were measured. Though the scale was unable to capture interconnected and conflicting values of leaders concurrently, it did offer a platform for identifying servant leadership characteristics in some organizations. Another multidimensional measuring scale, designed by Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), examined servant leadership characteristics among leaders through a cross-cultural survey of 1571 participants in the Netherlands and UK. Eight servant leadership characteristics were found to have positive impact on employees' performance. These are authenticity, courage, accountability, standing back, forgiveness, stewardship, empowerment and humility. Three of these attributes; accountability, humility and empowerment, had the greatest impact on employee job performance.

Also, Peterson et al. (2012) sampled 126 Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in America to determine the effect of servant leadership characteristics and organizations' performance. The CEOs' characteristics that were analysed are organizational identification, narcissism and founder status. While controlling for transformational leadership, results from the study showed that servant leadership has positive association with firms' performance, measured in terms of returns on assets. Though, the researchers assumed that this positive relationship could have been triggered by the firms' engagement in certain corporate social responsibility activities. Again, the study revealed that narcissism, the tendency to exhibit excessive love for control and power, was highly unconnected with the tenets of servant leadership.

De Waal & Sivro (2012) empirically tested the existing interrelationships among three key

variables; servant leadership, organizational performance and high performance organizations. The authors wanted to know the impact of these three variables on each other. Using 1200 employees in a university hospital in Amsterdam, the researchers determined the influential role servant leadership characteristics plays on three performance indicators namely; annual financial statements, patient level of satisfaction and employee loyalty. Although the findings suggested that patient satisfaction and financial reports were not directly connected to servant leadership characteristics, but employees' loyalty was greatly improved by servant leadership behavioural patterns. The positive connection between servant leadership and employees' loyalty was attributed to servant leadership characteristics, which were targeted at developing employees' welfare.

Mittal and Dorfman (2012), on the other hand, conducted the first empirical study on servant leadership and national culture in 62 different countries. The authors' intended to identify leadership behavioural patterns that lead to organizational effectiveness among different cultural settings. The authors were also interested to know whether companies' executives often lead in accordance to the cultural demands of a society, or not; and the implications of such actions. Data was, qualitatively and quantitatively, collected and analysed from 1060 organizations and among other things, it was found that leadership behaviour was defined by the cultural demands of a given society. Also, effective leaders are those who were able to maintain this standard whereas, leaders who could not were seen as ineffective. The authors also found key leadership skills among the studied organizations across the different countries. For example, the study identified vision as a universally practiced leadership style, which is also one of the principles of servant leadership.

In a similar study by Hunter et al. (2013), the association between three key variables; servant leadership, critical outcomes and personality traits were critically examined. The

study aimed to determine the effect of servant leadership on various outcomes and levels within and outside the organizations. Extraversion and leaders' agreeableness (tendency to agree) were the two personality traits used in the study. A combination of 224 stores, 425 subordinates, 110 in-store managers and 40 district managers were sampled. Servant leadership characteristics were also analysed from followers' point of view, as well as the leaders. Results from the study showed that leaders' extraversion had negative association with servant leadership, while leaders' tendency to agree was positively linked to the adoption of servant leadership principles.

The above reviewed literature reveals that servant leadership impacts employees performance, which indirectly reflects on the performance of an organization. The next section deals with the universality debate of the concept of leadership and of servant leadership.

Universality of Leadership Theories

Universality is described as the ability to effectively apply principles of servant leadership in different cultural and organizational settings. As a universal principle of management, leadership is as old as the story of creation, and remains one of the most practiced managerial principles (Murdock, 1967 cited in Bass, 1997). The universality aspect of leadership, and of course servant leadership, seems to have taken its root from the universality of principles of management. Certain managerial principles such as direction, co-ordination, control and staffing were known to have universal applications as earlier proposed by Koontz (1969). Based on this proposition and similar research, the pathway for the universality physiognomy of servant leadership was created, however, the universality aspect of leadership is not a recent development.

Over the years, many authors (Bass & Stogdill, 1990; Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman, 1999; Dorfman, 1996) have, either equivocally or unequivocally, taken a universal stance to address the concept of leadership in different organizational and societal settings. Similar to the principles of management, their writings reflect the universality tendency of certain leadership skills, such as transformational skills, visionary skills and charismatic skills, in terms of their broad application across different societies. Just as some aspects of leaders' behaviour are considered productive by reason of the positive influence it has on subordinates, there are also negative behavioural patterns whose practices are literarily condemned in almost every society.

Examples of such behaviours are dictatorship, unrepentant attitude, laziness, and dishonesty (Den Hartog et al., 1999). Likewise, there is a parallel line of argument of this universality stance, with respect to servant leadership behavioural pattern. It can be argued that the strength of servant leadership lies in its easy adoption in different societies regardless of their cultural orientations. The writings of Spears (1996) also portrayed servant leadership as a universal leadership approach, whereby leaders as well as individuals, are expected to carry out leadership duties in the process of serving others. While drawing similarities between transformational and servant leadership theories, Smith, Montagno, and Kuzmenko (2004) agreed with Spears and Lawrence (2002), that servant leadership has universal characteristics.

The authors strongly claimed that servant leadership is applicable in virtually all types of cultures regardless of differences in these cultures (Smith et al., 2004). In support of this claim, a research by Dalati (2014), exploring the behaviour of leaders in different cultural settings, revealed that despite differences among leadership theories, they all "transcend national borders and are endorsed across cultures" (Dalati, 2014, p. 59). By developing a universal leadership model, this research sought to foster a sense of balance between self-

development and improvement of individual leader's behaviour. In view of this, leadership theories such as servant leadership, charismatic leadership, transformational leadership, team-oriented leadership, visionary and authentic leadership theories are regarded as universal leadership theories. Simply because, their principles were found practicable across different cultures. The next section of the paper takes the universality debate further on by identifying servant leadership principles in different organizational and cultural settings.

Universal Principles of Servant Leadership

Due to its relative significance to individuals and organizations, servant leadership is currently being explored extensively from various angles. Although early researchers (Robert, 2003; Spears, 1996, 2004) were more concerned about conceptualising the construct particularly, with regards to how it differs from other leadership theories, than on how it leads to organizational outcomes. The emphasis has since shifted as researchers (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden et al., 2015; Liden et al., 2008; Nazarpoori & Kalani, 2014; Panaccio, Henderson, Liden, Wayne, & Cao, 2014; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; Verdorfer & Peus, 2014) are now concerned about the development of appropriate instruments with which the characteristics of servant leadership can be evaluated based on empirical evidences.

This enduring and measureable characteristic of servant leadership arguably makes it quite appealing to adopt in different societies. In the last decade, the literature on servant leadership is being dominated by studies exploring the effectiveness of the construct in different cultural settings. One of such studies was that of Hale and Fields (2007) as earlier mentioned in this paper. This cross-cultural research was conducted to empirically examine the effect of three servant leadership characteristics namely humility, vision and service, on

leadership effectiveness using 157 subordinates from Ghana and America. The findings revealed that vision, which is a principle of servant leadership, was commonly found among these organizations. Thereby suggesting that, servant leadership is neither contextually bound to any specific type of organization nor is it restricted geographically to a particular country/society.

In the same view, Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) empirical study to measure the dimension of servant leadership characteristics among leaders in UK and Netherlands revealed eight characteristics of servant leadership. These are standing back, courage, forgiveness, humility, stewardship, authenticity, empowerment and accountability, had positive impact on subordinates' performance. Consistent with Hale and Fields (2007) findings, some of these characteristics had universal implications. Specifically, humility was found present among the population of the study in both countries. In addition to these, the findings from Mittal and Dorfman (2012) study also revealed aspects of servant leadership principles with universal orientations. Their study revealed that vision, a principle of servant leadership, was visibly present in the cultures of the different countries that were studied.

Finally, this paper examines a similar study conducted by Dorfman et al. (2012) of the Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) project, offers some significant insights to the culture-leadership dyad and, the universality debate. The study showed that certain value-oriented behavioural patterns of leaders such as vision and integrity, lead to leadership effectiveness in organizations regardless of the culture of the organization. While the findings from the GLOBE project reveals that value plays a key role in defining leaders' behaviour, the implication is that some aspects of a leader's value system are universally accessible. Therefore, the above identified principles of servant leadership such as humility (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), vision (Dorfman et al.,

2012; Hale & Fields, 2007; Mittal & Dorfman, 2012) and integrity (Dorfman et al., 2012) suggests that servant leadership is a universal leadership construct.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be argued that, as far as the theorization of servant leadership is concerned, there are still very many untapped possibilities. The theoretical exploration of the construct is a necessary condition for its advancement as a body of knowledge, and possible sustainability. Consequently, there is need to constantly conduct rigorous and systematic studies (Laub et al., 1999; Parris & Peachey, 2013), in order to make useful contributions to the existing knowledge on servant leadership and establishing it as a distinctive field of study (Bryant & Brown, 2014). Though these options might not be mutually exclusive, but they serve as avenues through which the debate on servant leadership can be sustained particularly, the aspect of its universalism.

In view of the prevailing global leadership challenges, it is arguably necessary to recognize servant leadership as a universal leadership construct. So as to critically assess the diversity of individuals, organizations and national cultures, as well as their impact on leadership research in line with some global standards. This is because leadership effectiveness is determined by how well leaders address the cultural expectations of subordinates vis-à-vis organizations' outcomes. The universality dimension of advancing servant leadership does not completely ignore, neither does it fail to appreciate, individualism of leaders. This refers to differences and/or uniqueness of individual leaders within the leadership equation (Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009). Until these differences are recognized and critically examined, the leadership challenge may continue to haunt both academics and practitioners.

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