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James Elliker

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Understanding Ontological Conflict Between Servant Leadership and Organizations

James Elliker, Alvernia University

Abstract

This article lays the groundwork for discovering the roots of potential inherent conflict between the practice of servant leadership and organizations. It asks the research questions: Do the very natures, or ontologies of both servant leadership and organizations somehow collide, and if so, what resolution strategies can be pursued by the practicing servant leader? The author proposes an initial deductive theory that includes three core premises: First, servant leadership by nature exists to serve the growth of people, while organizations exist to accomplish a collective purpose. Second, servant leadership by nature raises up a new generation of leaders who will likely challenge existing organizational boundaries and methods, while organizations act through processes and roles to accomplish specific goals towards its purpose. Finally, servant leadership survives over the long term by generating leaders who in turn impact larger communities, while, organizations survive by adapting to a changing environment. From this analysis, there appears to be potential conflict inherent between these two natures. Further deduction suggests some potential resolution strategies for the practicing servant leader. Future research could include a mixed method that compares this deductive work with grounded theory from practicing servant leaders.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Organizations, Conflict, Ontology

Servant leadership is a concept that has gained increased notice within modern organizations. Its premise, as described over the last quarter century, was revived largely due to the writings of Robert Greenleaf (1977, 1998), which premised a servant first attitude, the raising of other servant leaders, and the potential impact on society. Considerable attention since has been devoted to attributes, measurements, and impact of servant leaders. Yet the servant leader may not be as welcome within organizations as we might first postulate. There is potential for significant differences and conflict between organizations and servant leaders. The intent of this article is to explore potential differences, and potential resolution strategies.

The form of the modern organization has gone through a number of transformations, including scientific management, mass industrialization, management science as a discipline, six sigma quality movement, significant empowerment efforts, the rise of the computer and the information age, the proliferation of the network age, and most recently the early rise of bottom up organic organizations. Yet, in every era of organizational transformation the tension between organizational pressures and human dynamics does not seem to have lessened.

Warner (2007) humorously highlights one of Franz Kafka's (1883-1924) unfinished manuscripts, called *The Castle* (1926), that told the story of a land surveyor who was hired to assist a small town and its castle baron. In a telling moment, the Superintendent says "You have been taken on as a Land Surveyor, as you say, but unfortunately we have no need of a Land Surveyor" (p. 1025). Warner highlights that "arbitrary authority reduces the individual to uncomprehending powerlessness." (p. 1024). This fictional narrative from almost a century ago hints at the frustrating paradox of bureaucracies that is experienced today within organizations. Similarly, Warner notes that Max Weber (1864-1920), considered a foundational early writer on organizations, saw the dependence of organizations on a rationality that reduced members to feeling like a part of a machine, yet who in turn want to become a bigger part of that machine. Weber noted (1978) "the [audience's] passion for bureaucratization drives us to despair" (p. 1024). It would appear that an organization's drive to organize alienates the very people it is organizing.

In the middle of the 20th century, efforts in leadership theory were aimed at creating an ideal approach that balances organizational drive with individual needs. These efforts included the optimized "9-9 manager" (Blake and Mouton, 1964), the situational manager (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969), and integrating organizations with adult personalities (Argyris, 1957). Professor Likert (1967) of Michigan pointedly asked why more organizations would not adapt an engaging open management style even when the evidence demonstrates its superiority in effectiveness.

In the last quarter of the 20th century, leadership theory focused even more directly on the impact on others, including transformational leadership, change leadership, ethical leadership, team leadership, as well as servant leadership. It is possible that the increased complexity of organizational systems has highlighted the criticality of human interaction

in order to achieve organizational objectives. People impact is no longer simply a good thing to recognize, it may well be the bottleneck to organizational outcomes. This long lasting phenomenon highlights a conflict in nature between organizations and the development of people.

We can further explore this tension between organizations and people through the lens of servant leadership. This is a reasonable inquiry because of the nature of servant leadership with its emphasis on the development of people. There are hints of possible inherent conflicts. As recently as three years ago, Professor Heskett (2013) of Harvard asked why servant leadership is not more present. Yukl (2010) noted that potential consequences of servant leadership “are not all beneficial for an organization” (p. 421). Further, the nature of a possible inherent conflict is still largely unexplored. Therefore, of particular interest for this inquiry, is the interaction between organizations and servant leaders.

If the nature and outcome of organizations and servant leadership are at odds, then both organizations and servant leaders would be wise to consider the points of conflict and remedial actions. For this study, we focus on two questions: Do the very natures, or ontologies of organizations and servant leadership collide, and if so, what strategies can be pursued by practicing servant leaders to effectively manage the conflict? We are interested in finding any pattern of possible conflict between servant leadership and organizations that can assist those practicing this leadership style to change the dynamic.

An initial deductive model is introduced that includes three ontological premises, generally reflecting the Greenleaf (1977, 1998) model of servant leadership, and the Argyris (2009) model of organizations: First, servant leadership by nature exists to serve others, while organizations exist to accomplish a collective purpose. Second, servant leadership by nature operates by raising up a new generation of healthy leaders who will likely challenge existing organizational boundaries and methods, while organizations operate through processes and roles to accomplish goals towards its purpose. Finally, servant leadership survives over the long term by generating other leaders who in turn raise the healthy impact on larger communities, while, organizations survive by adapting to a changing environment. At each level of being, there appears to be potential conflict inherent between these two natures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nature of Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is an emerging concept, still in its infancy in modern scholarship yet rich in its ancient history, that helps to explain many experiences within an organization. Robert Greenleaf (1977, 1998) is noted as a core modern author of the concept, which at its core he defined as the desire to serve first, then lead as necessary. And along with this he introduced two core tests – do people grow healthier and stronger and wiser and more capable of leading themselves as a result of working with a servant

leader - and what is the effect on the least privileged in society? There has been a widening stream of research on the concept since then, including Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2003), Spears (2010), Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011), and Parris and Peachy (2012). There are also a number of summary texts that include the topic in an overview of leadership, including Northouse (2016), Yukl (2010), and Bass and Bass (2008). Parris and Peachy (2012) completed a systematic literature review of servant leadership studies and concluded several findings - that there is no consensus on its definition, there are multiple measures, it is being widely investigated, and it is a viable theory that helps organizations and followers. Stone, Russell and Patterson (2003) described the differences between servant leadership and transformational leadership, which asserts that the growth of people is paramount, regardless of organizational effects. "This tendency of the servant leader to focus on followers appears to be the primary factor that distinguishes servant leadership from transformational leadership" (p.2). Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011) stated that in comparison to other major theories of leadership, "none of these models illuminate the need for leaders to serve the followers." Stone, Russell and Patterson (2003) suggest explicitly, and as the Yukl, Gordon and Taber (2002) taxonomy described implicitly, that servant leadership, along with transformational leadership, is a higher order model of behavioral leadership theory. Melchar and Bosco (2010) found that servant leadership can provide a successful alternative to other leadership styles such as autocratic, performance-maintenance, transactional, or transformational" (p. 84).

There have been a number of attempts at measuring the nature of servant leadership, including Laub's (1999) initiating work, Barbuto and Wheeler's (2006) comparison work, and a comprehensive analysis by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) produced five servant leadership factors—altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, wisdom, and organizational stewardship. They found significant relations to transformational leadership, leader-member exchange, extra effort, satisfaction, and organizational effectiveness (p. 300). Hayden (2011), a doctoral student of Barbuto, empirically tested Robert Greenleaf's (1977, 1998) seminal articulation of servant leadership. The four personal outcomes he theorized (health, wisdom, freedom-autonomy, and service orientation) were tested against established dimensions of servant leadership. All correlations were significant and positive (p. ii). Barbuto and Hayden (2011) also tested the Barbuto and Wheeler measurement against the measurements of leader-member exchange. They indicated that "all five dimensions of servant leadership had significant relationships to LMX. The strongest predictor of LMX was the emotional healing component of servant leadership. This means those leaders who are perceived as able, and willing, to connect with colleagues on an emotional level (specifically in a healing context) build strong, positive relationships with these colleagues." (p. 30). Although the data is early and mixed, there appears to be research supporting the positive impact of servant leadership.

However, there may be an apparent conflict with servant leadership within organizations. As noted above James Heskett (2013) queried that despite the attractiveness of servant leadership, why isn't it more prevalent? Yukl (2010) explained that the welfare

or growth of the individuals may supersede the short term performance of the organization, or even the career of the servant leader. Stone, Russell and Patterson (2003) explained further that “the servant leader does not serve with a primary focus on results; rather the servant leader focuses on service itself” and that they “trust their followers to undertake actions that are in the best interest of the organization, even though the leaders do not primarily focus on organizational objectives” (p. 355). In this light, it is easy to see how organizational leaders who are held accountable for specific outcomes would find it difficult to trust fully servant leaders within their organizations.

There have been a few specific phenomenological studies of servant leaders in organizations that highlight conflict. Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011) studied 15 servant leaders and summarized some of the servant leader barriers. Foster (2000) also detailed the barriers servant leaders face by interviewing 20 recognized servant leaders in a single corporation. These blockages to servant leadership focused on cultural barriers such as lack of trust, conflicting leadership styles, and lack of communication, and included some suggested remedies to be organizationally implemented. Foster noted the significant conflict between his participants and organizational barriers, and tended to support Greenleaf’s supposition that servant leaders should only work for other servant leaders. Chu (2011) studied the correlations between pastors’ conflict management style and servant leadership in churches. Garcia (2004) explored the relationship between transformational and transactional leadership with conflict style of the leader. The work of all the above researchers’ touches upon an important point. Servant leaders likely face conflict as they serve their organizations. But our understanding of the reason and nature of that conflict is only at the beginning stages, and therefore servant leaders are apt to be caught unaware of the phenomenon. This could lead to significant discouragement or departure of valuable leaders from organizations, and the possible reduction of servant leadership practices within organizations.

The Nature of Organizations

To investigate the interactions between organization and servant leaders we need to better understand the ontology or inherent nature of organizations. The study of organizations extends throughout history, including militaries, governments, townships, and collectives of worship. In the 20th century rise of business organizations, Frederick Taylor (1856-1915) introduced a systemized approach to creating a more “scientific” (1914) organization. This perspective on organizations exists to today, and in its modern form might be similar in some extent to the continuous improvement efforts out of Japan in the 1980’s and further adopted by the Baldrige and Kaizan initiatives in the US. Max Weber (1864-1920) considered the father of organizational theory, described the rise of the organization in the early 20th century, although his writings were not translated into English until mid-century (1978). In the mid-century organizational dynamic research includes Argyris (1957), Bennis (1966), and Likert (1967). Their research focused on the emerging large corporations, the need for bureaucratic methods of large scale functional tasks, and the rising need for human perspectives. Argyris (2009) provided many meaningful

observations on organizations in this light. They are helpful in observing the ontological nature of organizations, including the need for corrective feedback mechanisms, objectives, roles and departments. He stated that “the degree of dependency, submissiveness, and so on, tends to increase as one goes down the chain of command and as the job requirements and managerial controls direct the individual” (p. 58). Critically to our study, he stated that there are three organizational activities: “(1) achieving objectives, (2) maintaining the internal system, and (3) adapting to the external environment.” (p. 120).

Modern organizational investigators include Wheatley (2006), Morgan (2006) and Yukl (2010). Here the emphasis has been on the changing nature of organizations from a more mechanized approach to an organic structure, where change is not linear, and organizations continue to include a complexity of interdependent systems and actors. As a result, organizations can be quite complex, responding to a demanding global stage, and sometimes hard to understand. Meyer and Bromley (2013) call the modern organization “social actors” and “structurally nonrational” (p. 366).

For our purposes, we want to focus on a simple definition of an organization. As Argyris (2009) stated, “organizations are usually created to achieve objectives that can best be met collectively” (p. 35). In other words, an organization is a group of people (both internal and external) connected together for a common purpose. Junginger (2008) notes that “while every form of organizing involves people, resources, structure, and purpose, an *organization* requires a group of people that utilizes available resources in an agreed manner to pursue a *common* or shared purpose” (p.32). Bottazzi and Ferrario (2009) describe an organization as a “complex entity [to run] complex activities” (p. 228). This combined effort of people may seem to be an obvious statement, but its implications are significant for the servant leader. Combined efforts can be voluntary, involuntary, highly engaging of capabilities or highly controlled, networked to other organizations, a combination of internal and external resources, all of which impact individuals and leadership.

The Interaction between Organizations and Servant Leadership

From the beginning of organizational studies, there has been a parallel concern over the impact on human lives. Organizational theory includes the functions, objectives, behaviors, and results of focusing groups of people on specific outcomes. As we noted at the beginning, Warner (2007) highlighted a very early emerging conflict over the impact of organizational bureaucracies on people, from the 19th and early 20th century writings of Kafka and Weber. “Weber was deeply concerned with the concentration of power and the tragically dehumanizing nature of life in bureaucracies” (p. 505). Further, Weber (1978) notes the longevity of “bureaucratic machinery that will normally continue to function” even after a revolution or occupation. Argyris (1957) stated a premise that “healthy individuals will tend to have their self-actualization blocked or inhibited because of the demands of the formal organization” (p. 76). Rahim (2002) noted that “conflict and tension will go up as more people challenge the old ways of thinking and doing things” (p. 227).

The nature and presence of conflict between individuals and organizations has been an area of significant concern.

In speaking of the bureaucratic model of organization, Pondy (1967) indicated that “conflict is intimately tied up with the stability of the organization...conflict is a key variable in the feedback loops that characterize organizational behavior” (p. 297-298). If conflict between individuals and organizations are ubiquitous, then the practice of servant leadership, which is focused on the development of individuals, will also surface key areas of conflict. Savage-Austin and Honeycutt’s (2011) interviews of servant leaders mention several barriers to servant leaders within organizations, the most common being “culture, the fear of change... and the lack of knowledge regarding the philosophy of servant leadership practices... resulting in minimal inclusion of followers in the decision-making process” (p. 53). Parris and Peachy (2012) at the end of their comprehensive study of servant leadership commented that “servant leadership contrasts, traditional leader-first paradigm, which sadly... is at the heart of most organizations” (p. 390). Peterson, Galvin, and Lange (2012) sampled 126 CEO’s in technology organizations, and discovered different relationships between leadership styles and servant leadership, including a positive one between founder status and servant leadership, and that CEO servant leadership predicted subsequent firm performance (p. 565). Foster (2000) discovered barriers to the practice of servant leadership that included communications, development, middle management, rewards, and the understanding of servant leadership. But we can learn from conflict. It may well be one of the most valuable keys to understanding growth in both individuals and organizations.

METHOD

The intent of this article is to create an initial deductive model of potential conflict between the nature of organizations and the nature of servant leadership. In this manner, we can follow the path of Argyris (2009) to climb to the “highest possible heights of abstraction,” postulate “the essential properties” of this conflict and then return “to the empirical world to test” (p. 149). A next step beyond this article would be to test our assumptions with identified servant leaders across a spectrum of organizations, and allow a grounded model to emerge.

The deductive reasoning herein is straightforward. If both organizations and servant leaders are considered distinct entities with purpose and methodology, then the purpose or methodology of both can be compared. If there are noticeable differences in purpose and methodology, the potential for conflict exists. To achieve this comparison, a table is constructed that highlights three key questions of being: why it exists, how it may operate, and its long term need to survive. Then, within the table we present some preliminary answers to those questions from both the servant leader perspective and an organizational perspective. In both cases we are emphasizing the core nature of each entity. Finally, we take a logical leap to predict where potential moments of conflict could occur for those practicing servant leadership within an organization. In responding to the questions, we

are relying on a presumed ontology of servant leadership, most specifically around the three core concepts of Greenleaf (1977, 1998), and a presumed ontology of organizations, roughly parallel to Argyris (1957, 2009).

A second table is then constructed to highlight potential moments of conflict, and ask our second question – what strategies should a practicing servant leader pursue to manage such conflicts? We again use deductive reasoning, and come to an initial model of action.

Table 1 An Initial Model of Ontological Conflict

Ontological Questions	Servant Leadership Ontology	Organization Ontology	Potential Moments of Conflict for Those Practicing Servant Leadership
Why does it exist?	Leadership exists to serve others	Individuals organized to accomplish a purpose	<p><i>When the pursuit of organizational purpose unintentionally dehumanizes its members in the accomplishment of that purpose.</i></p> <p><i>When the servant leader continues to organizationally serve others who are redirecting the organization without consensus.</i></p>
How does it tend to operate?	Builds up a community of healthy new leaders	Organizes and executes goals through roles, processes, tasks	<p><i>When the roles, processes and tasks overly restrict or reduce the capabilities of its new leaders.</i></p> <p><i>When emerging leaders challenge and change roles, processes, tasks and mission at a pace beyond organizational capacity.</i></p>
How does it survive for the long term?	Generates a larger healthy community, including under-privileged	Challenges itself when circumstances change	<p><i>When bureaucracy or autocratic power becomes dominant, less able to change, and less focused on growing new leadership.</i></p> <p><i>When the larger healthy community no longer is dependent on the organization.</i></p>

DISCUSSION

Table 1 details our first deductive results on the question of potential moments of conflict for those practicing servant leadership within organizations.

For the first question – why does it exist – we can say that servant leadership exists to serve others, while organizations exist so that a group of people can accomplish a selected purpose. A potential moment of conflict for a servant leader within that organization could then arise if the pursuit of an organizational purpose begins to dehumanize its members. Situations that come to mind might include organizational layoffs, long and unusual working conditions, and intimidation of organizational members. The servant leader is called to challenge these actions and help the organization think through ethical and humane strategies to accomplish the overall organizational purpose. There could also be conflict in the other direction. For instance, if the servant leader continues to serve individuals who are actively redirecting the organizational purpose, the organization is called to challenge the servant leader. Instances that come to mind could include supporting a member who continues to fall short of his responsibilities, regardless of frequent counseling, or not taking command of a business situation when, as Greenleaf (1977, 1998) indicated, a servant leader also leads as necessary.

The second question – how does it tend to operate – leads us to say that servant leaders build up a community of healthy new leaders, and organizations execute goals through roles, processes, and tasks. Potential moments of conflict then can arise in two situations. First when the roles, processes and tasks overly restrict or reduce the capabilities of its emerging new leaders. In this case the servant leader is called to coach new leaders in effective change management.

Alternatively, when emerging leaders challenge and change roles, processes, tasks and mission at a pace beyond organizational capacity, the organization can challenge the servant leader to slow the pace of development. The third ontological question – how does it survive for the long term – leads us to say that servant leaders tend to build up healthy communities beyond their immediate circle of contacts. This occurs because the emerging healthy leaders, coached by the servant leader, expand their own impact into their families, communities and occasionally other organizations. In some ways, this is the most powerful impact of servant leadership. When one is asked – who was their favorite boss – the answer is often the one who believed in me and gave me room to grow. This has a multiplying effect over time - especially when that affected subordinate becomes a leader of others. On the organizational side of the question, organizations survive when they sustain a capacity to challenge themselves as the external environment changes. If not, organizational flexibility and life diminish. Both potential conflicts for servant leaders - when bureaucracy or autocratic power becomes dominant, less able to change, and new leadership becomes less critical – and when the health of the organization reduces its ability to sustain internal and external stakeholders - call for a decision on the part of those practicing servant leadership: Is it better to continue to advocate internal change or is it

time to depart and align with an organization more adapted to servant leadership principles. Greenleaf (1977) suggests it is best to follow other servant leaders, but occasionally that may not be a practical solution. We need to explore each of the levels of conflict as to their nature and possible resolution strategies.

Based on our model, it would appear that there are potential conflict points between servant leadership and organizations – of all types. These points of contention logically originate in the differences between the ontology of each at all three levels – their purpose, their methodology of operating, and their survival mechanisms. We might describe the difference in why they exist as a people verses purpose difference. When purposes differ between parties, conflict arises. Similarly, we could describe operational differences as a people verses process difference. When ways of getting things done differ, conflict emerges. Finally, we could describe survival differences as a people verses power difference. Entities need to adapt to survive, but can resort to power when adaptation appears unreasonable. Conflict arises if either entity resorts to power.

The reasonable next question is what strategy can a practicing servant leader pursue in managing such conflict. The servant leader, or those choosing to practice servant leadership principles, are called to resolve these ontological moments of conflict when they occur, or prevent them from occurring. For the sake of this deductive model, we are limiting our discussion to strategies of servant leadership, rather than organizational strategies to reduce conflict. Both are legitimate, and a few studies previously noted above focus on organizational strategies. However, we are concerned for the moment on the practice of servant leadership in this context.

Conflict resolution strategies might include some classic options of confrontation, avoidance, negotiation, or integration. These should be tested and researched within the community of servant leaders. Further, there may be some resolution strategies unique to servant leadership, such as self-sacrifice or what we might call a non-confrontational “judo-flip” that converts the energy of the controlling power into organic power. But if we continue our deductive methodology, and pursue Aristotle’s methodology of finding the mean or balanced approach towards ethics, we may be able to discover some early hints of successful servant leadership strategies of conflict resolution. Further, we can compare these strategies to insights from some prior researchers.

Table 2 takes the conclusions of Table 1, and then describes an Aristotle-like “golden mean of conduct” (Loomis, 1943, p. xxxiii) between the two extremes of conflict between the organization and the servant leader. Thus, a reasonable strategy emerges for servant leaders to either integrate solutions or avoid unnecessary conflict. We then discuss each strategy.

Table 2 Possible Servant Leader Resolution Strategies

Ontological Questions (from Table 1)	Potential Moments of Conflict for Those Practicing Servant Leadership (from Table 1)	Possible Servant Leader Resolution Strategy (between the conflict extremes)
Why does it exist?	<p>When the pursuit of organizational purpose unintentionally dehumanizes its members in the accomplishment of that purpose</p> <p>When the servant leader continues to organizationally serve others who are redirecting the organization without consensus</p> <p>“People verses Purpose”</p>	<p><i>In people verses purpose conflicts, the servant leader must either be a member of the senior organizational staff, or have consistent access to that group of leaders. This increases openness to challenge and growth in both individuals and the organization.</i></p>
How does it tend to operate?	<p>When the roles, processes and tasks overly restrict or reduce the capabilities of its new leaders</p> <p>When emerging leaders challenge and change roles, processes, tasks and mission at a pace beyond organizational capacity</p> <p>“People verses Process”</p>	<p><i>In people verse process conflicts, the servant leader should encourage high levels of member engagement. This increases innovation, excellence, and growth of emerging leaders.</i></p>
How does it survive for the long term?	<p>When bureaucracy or autocratic power becomes dominant, less able to change, and less focused on growing new leadership</p> <p>When the larger healthy community no longer is dependent on the organization</p> <p>“People vs Power”</p>	<p><i>In people verses power conflicts, the servant leader should model a self-sacrificial path that neither seeks power or independence.</i></p>

People versus Purpose Conflicts

First, when either organizational dehumanization or radical redirection emerges as people versus purpose conflicts, it suggests that servant leaders must choose a middle ground of either being a direct member of the senior organizational staff, or at minimum have consistent access to that group of leaders, in order to reduce that conflict. This increases senior leader openness to integrating the purposes of both organization and people growth. Servant leadership is not necessarily an abandonment of senior positional power. Rather, it is the ability to either set aside positional power, or use that power on behalf of growing others. This can be exercised at all levels of leadership, and increases the congruency between leadership and individuals within the organization – the very goal of Argyris’ work (2009). Further, Melchar and Bosco (2010) stated that “the modeling of servant leadership by strategic level managers can create an organizational culture in which servant leaders develop among lower-level managers” (p. 84). Dominance between those with leadership power and those without, lowers the ability to serve each other. In a recent study on housing negotiations between parties, Asher (2015) stated that a key obstacle to resolutions is “the unwillingness or incapacity of the previously dominant party to experience a shift in attitude about the previously subordinate party’s capacity to exercise power and impose costs” (p. 49). Alternatively, those practicing servant leadership at a senior level can strategically help create an organization that exists to serve. This was part of Greenleaf’s (1977, 1998) original vision, as well as others. Korten (1984) in espousing strategic organizational practice in the public arena said “the strategic organization represents ... a proactive commitment to the ideal that the purpose of organization is to serve the needs of people, while facilitating the human growth of all participants” (p. 341). There is something very positively powerful about senior positional leadership that exercises servant leadership actions. It tends to give confidence in people rather than an over reliance on restrictive tasks.

People versus Process Conflicts

When people capacity versus operational task limitation conflict occurs, the servant leader is a natural fit for encouraging organizational membership engagement. Servant leadership naturally engages talent at all levels in bringing their innovative solutions to difficult operational problems. This assists growth in both individuals and organizations. Burke and Ng (2006) similarly suggest that “organizations will need greater commitment and engagement of staff in order to remain competitive” (p. 93). Junginger (2008) in discussing the emerging nature of a product design into “human-centered design” (p.3) described how a company could actually organize along those principles. Intuit’s (Ramsey and Finney, 2015) organizational engagement model, where individuals can be rationally engaged (paid well, benefits, good environment), emotionally engaged (I work on a good team with a strong mission), and/or inspirationally engaged (we are out to change the world), the servant leader can coach individuals and other leaders along that spectrum. Organizational membership engagement is an apparent key for the servant leader to reduce conflict. However, this strategy presupposes the prior strategy of senior leadership

engagement or access. Otherwise, conflict that occurs in this operational realm, and rises for resolution at a more senior level, will be difficult to resolve.

People verses Power Conflicts

Finally, a key conflict that needs to be resolved by those exercising servant leadership is one that focuses on the long term survival of both organizations and servant-led communities. As an organization grows larger and more dominant in its sphere of influence, it tends to rely on its perceived power, and become less able to change. Paradoxically, as a servant-led community grows in its ability to function independently and healthy, it may begin to sense an ability to walk away from its original organization. To avoid these two extremes, a self-sacrificial servant leadership strategy can model a way towards both organizational and community humilities. Sachdeva, Iliev, Ekhtiari and Deghani (2015) recently revisited the famous runaway streetcar ethics problem, and found that “people approve of self-sacrifice more than directly harming another person to achieve the same outcome” (p. 1). Choi and Mai-Dalton (1999) discussed the effects on followers of leader self-sacrifice. To resolve many of these ontological issues, those practicing servant leadership are often called to self-sacrifice for the good and growth of others. This may mean voluntarily setting aside the servant leader’s career goals or the short term performance of the company (Yukl, 2010). Oddly, it may be that this more selfless strategy on the part of the servant leader becomes the beginning of growth on the part of both the organization and emerging servant leaders.

CONCLUSION

Servant leadership has a unique place in organizational life. It provides for the recognition and growth of talent throughout the organization, the ability of the organization to thrive through the growth of others, and the possibility of affecting a larger community. But the interaction between organizations and servant leadership has its conflict and risks. These risks can be classified by ontological questions, including why each force exists, how they operate, and how they survive over the long term. The above ontological model provides a preliminary answer that yes, such conflict likely exists, and presents three possible strategies of resolution for those practicing servant leadership within organizations to consider, including encouraging organization engagement, senior leadership engagement, and a self-sacrificial approach. This model presents an interesting parallel to Argyris’ (1957, 2009) hypothesis on the integration of the individual and the organization where “the organization will tend to develop unintended consequences when there is a lack of congruency between the individual needs and organizational demands” (2009, p. 67). One practicing servant leadership within an organization, often finds themselves at this point of tension between the individual and the organization. All of this suggests something we might call The Human Organization, to borrow a phrase from Likert (1967) where we can actualize that which has been imagined, researched and proposed - generating growth through a living organism. This calls for the active involvement of servant leadership in order to generate and sustain growth for individuals within and outside the boundaries of any organization.

Limitations and Next Steps

There are very significant limitations to the above study. It is deductively based as a first phase in a modified grounded theory research approach. Although it is informed through current research on servant leadership, the ontological conflict theory has yet to be tested in either qualitative or quantitative field studies. Second, although the model takes into account the nature of both organizations and servant leadership, our resolution discussion focused on actions that could be initiated by servant leadership. Organizational strategies are also quite legitimate. Finally, since we are taking an ontological view of servant leadership and organizations, we could explore differences well beyond the current or past century, and into both ancient and non-western histories.

There are a number of potential follow-up studies that could shed light on this area of servant leadership and organizational interaction. These could include a mixed method that compares this deductive work with grounded theory from practicing servant leaders. By more fully understanding this dynamic, the practice of servant leadership can continue to have a positive impact on both individuals and organizations.

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