



AGAPE

Empowering Servant-Leader Congruence

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Many have experienced situations where a leader has asked them to perform a task or exhibit certain characteristics that did not benefit the follower's growth, but that of their leader and/or organization. In these cases, leadership choices are not based on what is best for the individual follower, but more out of a self-centered mentality, facilitating a self-centered culture within departments, organizations, businesses, and potentially larger culture. The recent world financial crisis of 2008 was the result of a self-centered culture perpetuated on a grand scale and the domino effect created by selfishly motivated leadership, for which society is still feeling the impact (Giacalone & Wargo, 2009). While self-centered leadership actions may not culminate with the same effect size, the case can be made for the potential and far-reaching impact of a culture created by a selfish motivation. Conversely, an argument could also be made for the impact on culture by a selfless leader's commitment to putting another's wellbeing first (Northouse, 2013).

During my time in corporate America, the ideal of



considering another's wellbeing above one's own was rarely discussed, nor was it considered. Managers' perceived those who operated in selflessness as weaker or lesser individuals than others who exhibited more primal or self-preservation traits. These experiences ingrained within me a cynicism against love or love's applicable role in the workplace. While one may assume that leaders are weary of talking about leadership in terms akin to love, Mitroff and Denton (1999), in 90 interviews with high-level managers and executives, found that "terms such as love, respect, and wisdom are used freely and the concepts they represent are readily accepted" (p. 155). Ayers (2008) suggested that a loving "core to leadership" (p. 16) benefits both the leaders and their organizations. King (2004) went further, suggesting love in the workplace helps transform the environment, even creating transcendence within leaders, having the potential to radically impact surrounding cultures. While cynicism might exist regarding another's wellbeing in leadership and the workplace, literature suggests that the tide is turning and this cynicism is finding less room within successful business practice.

Considering love's role in this business scenario, Oord (2005) suggested that it is present when a leader's behavior is committed to the advancement of another's wellbeing. The idea of leading with a focus on the follower's wellbeing may be viewed largely as counterproductive when not convenient to an organization's larger goals. A leadership style that breaks from these assumptions, however, is the servant-leadership ideology and model (Greenleaf, 1977; Northouse, 2013). Studies have



shown, from business leadership (Ton, 2014) to nonprofit leadership (Egener & O’Connell, 2010), and even from basketball courts (Rieke, Hammermeister, & Chase, 2008), that those who employ this leadership style experience follower growth and larger organizational growth simultaneously. These studies suggest this model’s success is based on attributes within the model that require leaders to selflessly pour themselves into their followers and the simultaneous building of the organization that occurs from such.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how servant-leaders, when empowered by the agape form of love, may experience greater congruence in their leadership. The discussion will begin with further understanding of agape and make a case for choosing to operate within it, specifically when servant-leaders strive to love in compassion and with sheer dedication. The next objective will be to discuss three of the 10 servant leadership attributes (listening, empathy, and commitment to growth) that focus on and cultivate relationship-building, providing the platform for agape to emerge. The article concludes with a discussion suggesting that, when a servant-leader operates in love, the leader is experiencing heightened congruence. This will be done through the consideration of Frankl’s (1969) first law of dimensional ontology and the implications on servant leader congruence.

THE AGAPE FORM OF LOVE

In the 15th century, French philosopher Francois de La Rochefoucauld commented, “There is only one kind of love,



but there are a thousand different versions” (Oord, 2005, p. 931). Most commonly, references to love involve eros, philia, and agape (Kittel, 1964), but for the purposes of this article a closer look at agape given the nature of its meaning will be considered.

In C.S. Lewis’ book, *The Four Loves* (1960), he suggested all natural-based forms of love (affection, friendship and erotic love) in and of themselves will eventually be insufficient in the quest for human fulfillment; however, the agape form of love originates from devotion to God and the other, while producing a sense of purpose and self-actualization. Agape or charity, according to Lewis (1960), is an active type of love that partners with an individual in thought, word, action, and deed toward the benefit of the other.

Etymologically, agape originated in the Greek language and means “to prefer” or “to esteem one person more highly than another” (Kittel, 1964, p. 36). van Dierendonck and Patterson (2014) defined agape as a love in morality or “meaning to do the right thing at the right time and for the right reasons” (p. 3). hooks (2000) emphasized that love, and I would argue the agape form of love specifically, in practice is nurturing, even to the level of the “other’s” spiritual growth (p. 6).

The concept of self-transcendence finds resonance in *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning* (2000), where Frankl commented, “self-transcendence is the essence of human existence” (p. 138), and this article suggests that, what Frankl deemed self-transcendence, is living outside one’s interests and



ideals, while finding one's basis in agape. To further this point, Frankl went on to write:

Pre-reflective ontological self-understanding, one is actualizing oneself precisely to the extent to which one is forgetting oneself, and one is forgetting oneself by giving oneself, be it through serving a cause higher than oneself, or loving a person other than oneself. (p. 138)

In reflection of this practice of self-understanding, agape emerges through “the forgetting of oneself” and “serving a cause greater than one's own”.

Agape, therefore, is a selfless focus on what is better for another. In terms of servant-leadership, it is being other-centered (Underwood, 2008), where the other is a beloved other the leader looks to serve. The literature suggests that agape is the basis for the servant-leadership model (Chung, 2011; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Patterson, 2003). In light of this basis, I consider what outward expression agape might find within an organizational context.

How one measures agape in an organizational setting can be observed through compassion (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2014) and dedication (Ayers, 2008). Continuing to reflect on agape, as an overarching ideal that includes compassion and dedication, the role of compassion comes to the fore. Sprecher and Fehr (2005) described compassion as a focus on “. . . caring, concern, tenderness and an orientation toward supporting, helping and understanding the other particularly when the other is perceived to be suffering or in need” (p. 630). Mayer (2010) identified it as the concern for



the wellbeing of those being led. Compassion is an outward expression, a practical translation that results in a servant-leader's desire to serve (Greenleaf, 1977). The implied perspective of this article is to have compassion as an outcome of agape from the perspective that love is a force that exists beyond the physical realm. The presence of agape may be hard to identify; however, compassion can be more readily observed in a leader's character.

This idea of compassion focuses primarily on an action that demonstrates leader care for the follower (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2014). These authors further identified compassion as fundamental to implementing servant-leadership and, furthermore, suggested it is the bedrock of the servant-leader/follower relationship.

Compassion, as an attribute, strikes close to home for me. During a personal weakness assessment, lacking compassion was something a close friend brought to my attention. While citing my levels of consistency and resoluteness as admirable, it was pointed out that these same attributes hindered my ability to flow in compassion when it came to people. I concluded the root of the rigidity was based in assessment of one's perceived attributes and/or weaknesses without reassessment or reevaluation as the need arose. I see this same inflexibility in leaders who place the organization/business as first with its rules and/or organizational structure, and the follower as a cog in the machine. Compassion recognizes need and recalibrates for the betterment of the other and, in the end, the long-term success of a group. Lack of individual



consideration and compassion (outside of preset ideas) is counter to development of servant-leadership.

The need and role of compassion for a servant-leader, as outlined above in definition and example, allows me to conclude that agape can be expressed as compassion. hooks (2000) suggested that compassion is an aspect of love, but she emphasized that giving care (expressed compassion) in and of itself does not prove the existence of love (p. 8). As such, we suggest care, or expressed compassion, cannot be the sole predictor of the presence of agape; however, I suggest it is one component.

As dedication is evaluated and considered as another observable attribute of agape within a leader, the ideal of absolute dedication/commitment emerges. Ayers (2008) suggested that commitment is “a desire or decision to maintain love” (p. 3). In *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity* (Ferch, 2012), there is a prayer by Father Arrupe that conveys this idea of a servant-leader as absolutely committed within love. Father Arrupe stated:

What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy, and gratitude. Fall in love; stay in love, and it will decide everything. (p. 135)

I believe commitment to agape allows us to transcend ourselves and fuels a servant-leader’s capacity to serve.



Agape defined in this section represents a love that is self-transcendent, selfless, and places a follower's spiritual growth before a leader's own benefits. Servant-leaders operate in agape when they express concern for the care and wellbeing of followers as exhibited through compassion and dedication or resolute commitment. The very identity of a servant can be founded in agape (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Patterson, 2003; Sun, 2013).

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Servant-leadership originates from a desire to serve first, then choosing consciously to lead (Greenleaf, 1970). Servant-leaders make a conscious choice to empower followers through relational engagement and influence (Reinke, 2004). This is not to say that a servant-leader eludes power; on the contrary, servant-leaders embrace what power they are given to serve others (Sun, 2013). The servant-leadership model originates around the idea that the intent of the leader is to serve the follower through the denial of self-interest, while emphasizing follower personal development through empowerment (Thakore, 2013).

After analysis of Greenleaf's servant-leadership writings, Spears identified 10 characteristics of the servant-leader (Northouse, 2013; Spears, 1998). This paper examines three of the 10 characteristics, namely: listening, empathy and commitment to growth.

Listening demonstrates respect for followers by understanding the will of the group before a decision is made



while enhancing the conflict resolution skill set of the leader (Thakore, 2013, p. 26). Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) defined listening as “active acceptance of employee’s opinions, ideas and suggestions” (p. 305) and summarized that listening is all about “hearing and valuing” the thoughts of followers (p. 306). Bechler and Johnson (1995) found a positive relationship between listening skills and leadership effectiveness. The suggestion here is that listening, as a skill, is necessary for leaders to value the thoughts of their followers and to begin serving them with love.

Empathy, the second servant-leadership trait for consideration, is attempting to perceive the world from followers’ perspectives by understanding what they are feeling or thinking, resulting in followers experiencing a sense of uniqueness (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Northouse, 2013). Listening can facilitate empathy when leaders are able to position themselves into followers’ circumstances (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006) and toward larger follower growth. Empathy is perhaps the most important skill a servant-leader can have, as it facilitates the ability for the leader to comprehend beforehand how change might affect followers and take those feelings into account before actually making a change (Thakore, 2013).

Commitment to growth, also known as empowerment, within the servant-leadership context allows followers to develop positive outcomes (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Commitment to growth nurtures and demonstrates dedication to the follower’s personal, professional and spiritual growth (Thakore, 2013). The idea of a leader giving wholly to the



development of others within the institution is at the heart of the servant-leadership theory. The servant-leader's belief in the inherent value ascribed to each follower revolves around recognition, acknowledgement, and the "realization of each person's abilities and what the person can still learn" (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 251). The desired outcome for servant-leaders, operating with a commitment to growth mindset, is a greater sense of self-efficacy among followers (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) and therefore, empowerment.

Furthermore, these three attributes should not be considered in their singularity, but must be viewed as interdependent in the execution of agape by servant-leaders. Empathy, as a servant-leadership skill, is heavily dependent upon the listening attribute. Polychroniou (2009) defined empathy as, "one's ability to understand the feelings transmitted through *verbal* and nonverbal messages, to provide emotional support to people when needed, and to understand the links between others' emotions and behavior" (p. 345). Empathy leads to the ability to establish a strong position from which to identify and execute practical steps fostering the growth of those being led. It is not solely positioning oneself to understand through verbal and nonverbal cues, but in and of itself, empathy also "creates the distance or detachment required to make moral and normative judgments about others, and to take into account their long term good" (Burton, 2014, p. 1). Freedburg and Gallese (2007), however, outlined the relational dynamic that leaders bring forward when they embrace their feelings in considering and helping the other.



Coke, Batson, and McDavis (1978) helped understand the role of proximity in empathy, seemingly juxtaposed by the aforementioned authors, in two stages. First, the cognitive empathy stage builds a mental framework from which to develop perspective. Practically speaking, this process requires listening to verbal and nonverbal cues. The second phase is empathetic concern or the development of a desire to help (Coke et al., 1978). When embraced over time, a pattern of commitment/dedication to the other's growth is seen as an outflow of the empathetically developed compassion.

Realizing agape in one's servant-leadership requires skillfully weaving together the characteristics of listening, empathy, and commitment to growth. Listening to others helps a servant-leader to be informed as to where the follower is coming from. Empathy assists the servant-leader to better understand the follower's perspective and feelings before acting. Commitment to growth takes what was learned through listening and empathy and helps the follower get to where they need to go with the follower's well-being and benefit as the primary goal. Servant-leaders are committed to doing the work of agape when listening (hooks, 2000, p. 158) because the core value of servant-leadership is love (agape)—love of human beings (Chung, 2011).

The process of considering these servant-leadership attributes brings to light another mental barrier that held me from supporting the other, which I believe may pervade the field of servant-leadership without genuine reflection. Unidentified it defines what or how growth in the follower



“should” look, presetting the perfect outcome. Such thoughts are rooted in preconceived notions that the perceiver, and in this case, the leader, holds the ultimate answers or is the ultimate authority. Such thought is counter to the larger notion of the combined servant-leadership characteristics examined here, much less the theory as a whole. Listening recognizes that all is not known; empathy considers one’s processing as different and valued for considering individual growth; and a leader’s commitment to growth will take into account both as a means to partner with followers toward their long-term development. The nature of the perfect outcome or perfectionistic tendencies relegates servant-leadership to rote steps, rather than an engaging and committed lifestyle. A theory based on the greater good of the organization, instead of the individual, can be found in the hollow implementation of servant-leadership theory. I suggest servant-leaders who engage in agape choose to walk in selflessness and engagement that cannot be left at the door at the end of the workday. In *The Congruent Life*, Michael Thompson (2000) spoke to this messiness in the life of a congruent servant-leader:

These leaders will occasionally take risks with people who will disappoint them. . . . But, you see, gift-love (*agape*) is never based on reciprocity. It does not wait to see what you are willing to give to it before committing to give to you. In the context of organizational life, gift-love is embodied in managers or leaders who consistently spend and are spent in ways that grow the organization, advance its highest purposes and contribute to the



continuing growth and development of all its people. They have counted the cost of such a lifestyle of service, its openness and vulnerability, and found it far preferable to a life of self-protection, closedness, and self-interest. (pp. 201-202)

This process has exposed the need to understand that it is never going to be convenient to love (agape) and serve. The perfect circumstances rarely occurred, and in reflection, I missed many opportunities to serve in love while focusing on narrow perception of specific ideas of individual and organizational growth. Taking this into consideration, I advocate that, had agape been the primary basis for my service, perfectionism would have been nullified through my congruence.

CONGRUENCE

Congruence within the context of this article is best understood when a leader is operating in both agape (specifically, compassion and dedication) and servant-leadership (namely, listening, empathy, and commitment to growth). David Stanley (2008) suggested that congruent leadership is expressed when a leader's value system is seen through a leader's behaviors; intrinsically, follower influence is then based not on vision casting, but on the value system of the leader. "Congruent leaders are motivational, inspirational, organized, and effective communicators and relationship builders" (p. 522). Ayers (2008) proposed that congruence in the context of leadership is the alignment of one's values and



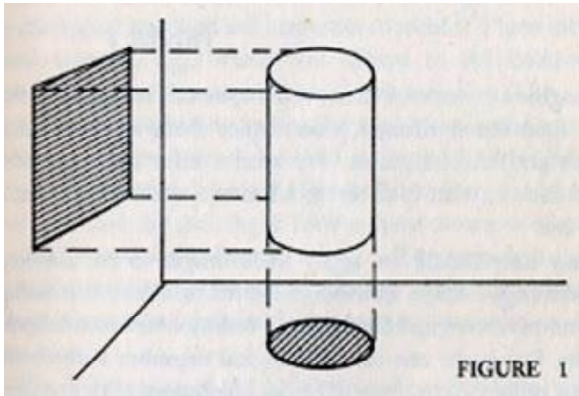
behaviors. We suggest congruent servant-leadership is maintained through agape and relationship building.

The construct for considering how agape empowers servant-leader congruence can be pondered through Frankl's (1969) first law of dimensional ontology (p. 23). In addition to discussing the first law, parallels will also be made from Figure 1 (see below) and concepts already conveyed previously regarding agape and servant-leadership, making the suggestion for what servant-leader congruence in action looks like.

Frankl (1969) defined the first law of dimensional ontology to be: "One and the same phenomenon projected out of it's own dimension into different dimensions lower than its own is depicted in such a way that the individual pictures contradict one another" (p. 23). In Figure 1, the example shows a cylinder that has been reflected to the side and bottom of the diagram, leaving shading in the shape of a rectangle and circle. Frankl suggested in his first law of dimensional ontology that the cylinder is an open system shape (pictured as the three-dimensional shape) and the rectangle and circle both represent a closed system (pictured as two distinct two-dimensional shapes). The rectangle measured provides the height and width of the cylinder and the circle provides the circumference; however, the issue that remains is that neither the measurement of the rectangle nor circle informs the observer that the object being reflected is a cylinder. One cannot perceive from one direction solely, or they miss the full context of the object, relegating a three-dimensional object to separate two-dimensional shapes. The



idea of congruence is pictured perfectly here as the presence of two different yet overlapping perspectives, which, when realized, can view the three-dimensional object as it is.



*Figure 1. First Law of Dimensional Ontology. Reprinted from *The Will To Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy* (p. 23), by V. E. Frankl, 1969, New York, NY: The Penguin Group. Copyright 2014 by First Plume printing. Reprinted with permission.*

For our purposes, this three-dimensional image will serve as a picture of servant-leader congruence where agape and servant-leadership intertwine. If one perceived the leadership as an outflow of agape or servant-leadership individually, a seeming contradiction occurs. Let us say that the cylinder represents servant-leader congruence. Specifically, the reflected rectangle, for our purposes, agape, provides the height and width (compassion and dedication) of the object. The reflected circle, servant-leadership, represents the circumference. In terms of servant-leadership, listening,



empathy, and commitment to growth (relationship building) represents the circular measurements.

The picture of Frankl's first law explains the parallel between his writing and our discussions surrounding servant-leader congruence. I propose servant-leader congruence is best observed and understood within an open system or one that allows both to be considered homogeneously; however, if projected and viewed individually, a closed system contradiction would exist, making that which is a seamless three-dimensional combination appear as two contradicting, two-dimensional entities. While considering agape or servant-leadership individually is not discouraged, doing so without understanding the interwoven nature prohibits a complete picture, and therefore, understanding the full scope and congruent implementation of this leadership style.

Considering agape and servant-leadership individually, limited qualities stand out. If one were to project agape individually, emotional engagement (compassion and dedication) would be singled out. From the servant-leadership angle, the focus is on relationship building (listening, empathy and commitment to growth). While both are great focal points in their own right, when combined, the potential for servant-leader congruence emerges.

CONGRUENCE: DEFENDING THE POWER OF AGAPE

An agenda focus, as opposed to a follower focus, by those in leadership positions activates individual and corporate nihilism, or a will to power. hooks (2000) stated, "where the



will to power is paramount love will be lacking” (p. 40). Note the word “paramount” in context; hooks suggested that love, where power is given higher priority, comes up short. With this conclusion, love and the servant-leadership model aligns almost equivalently (Chung, 2011; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Patterson, 2003).

The congruent servant-leader, those empowered by selfless love, produces individual and corporate/organizational growth. As such, it is a leadership style that provides an effective alternative to nihilistically focused leadership styles. Yet, without love servant-leadership as a model, can be motivated by the same nihilism, though masked in a shallow focus on the follower, which can be turned off after leaving the job if not couched in the agape form of love. Only through agape will most find meaning in the most challenging circumstances (Frankl, 1969). In that discovery, the increase of servant-leader congruence is found. In the context of the Bible, it is stated, “Love (agape) never fails” (I Cor. 13:8 King James Version). If it is true, humanity’s quests for achievements and significance will always be servant to our ability to function in agape. While the nihilistic viewpoint suggests love is doomed to failure, I would contend where agape exist, it exists without the ability to fail.

CONCLUSION

This paper suggests that agape plays an inseparable role in congruent servant-leadership implementation. Specifically, it is proposed that servant-leaders who exhibit compassion and



dedication alongside servant-leadership attributes, namely listening, empathy, and commitment to growth, can embody a more complete picture of servant-leadership, as pictured in Frankl's (1969) first law of dimensional ontology structure. In the final analysis, I propose agape love is necessary to attain congruence as a servant-leader. I leave you with Greenleaf's (2009) proclaimed servant-leadership credo to consider the partnering servant-leadership principles and agape, and further, the potential regenerative force servant-leaders implementing such might see:

This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions – often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them. (para. 6)

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