



ORGANIZATIONAL DISSENT AND SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

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Dissent is the choice to disagree and challenge the majority view of those holding positional power (Gordon 2008, 20; Martin 2008, 22). In some organizations, dissenting banter may be part of the process of healthy decision making and innovation. Dissenting conversations may initiate perturbations through the complex interactions of organizational life. With these unexpected interactions, the potential exists for discovering innovative notions that may benefit the organization (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky 2009, 145). Within other organizations, dissenting conversation may expose individual organizational members to the risk of being labeled as “out of step,” “not a team player,” or, worse, “a heretic” (Martin 2008, 25–26).

If the organizational climate causes these conversations to be difficult, the dissenting message will be expressed somewhere else (Kassing 1997, 137). To better manage dissent messages, organizational leaders may choose to foster values and relationships that better allow for the communication of dissent. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relationship of servant-leadership values to the effective leadership of organizational dissent. Servant-leadership may provide a values framework that could be helpful in the development of the authentic relationships required for the effective use of organizational dissent.

UNDERSTANDING DISSENT

To gain an understanding of dissent, Kassing traced the genesis and progression of dissent within organizations. According to Kassing, dissent is an expression of independent thinking and challenges accepted organizational mindsets. The work of Tompkins and Cheney (cited in Kassing 1997, 316) and their theory of unobtrusive control is used to explore organizational expectations and the force of their influence upon the fulfillment of



organizational ideals. Tompkins and Cheney pointed out that responsible parties within organizations use mission statements, values, and policies to control employees and organizational mindsets. Tompkins and Cheney then concluded that compliance is earned “unobtrusively,” or, in other words, without the omnipresence of supervisors. Dissent is present when a member of the organization begins to think independently of established organizational mindsets (*ibid.*, 316–17). This type of independent thinking arises when organizational action is not consistent with organizational ideals. As a result of this discrepancy, dissent is born. Independent thinkers then challenge organizational leaders, since organizational behavior appears to have deviated from what the dissenter expected of the organization (*ibid.*, 317).

Kassing continued his analysis of dissent by calling upon the work of Gorden, Infante, and Graham and their theory of independent-mindedness (Gorden, Infante, and Graham 1988, 103). The theory explains the natural inclination and desire of organizational members to freely speak their minds concerning organizational matters. Gorden et al. also pointed out that when organizational leaders encourage open, free, and civil dialogue, the organization is rewarded with greater productivity and member commitment to organizational ideals (*ibid.*, 104). They argued that when employees are able to speak openly and even debate organizational issues without the fear of reprisal, individuals are legitimized and given “voice” (*ibid.*). Gorden et al. noted that Miller and Monge in their work of 1988 had concluded that “participation” at this level had a positive effect on “satisfaction and productivity” (*ibid.*). When organizational leaders actively or passively discourage open conversation that gives organizational members voice, the frustration of dissenters increases (Fairhurst and Zoller 2008, 144).

Since dissenters will inevitably communicate their contrarian message, they must decide how the message will be expressed (Kassing 1997, 322). According to Martin, depending on their motivation and circumstances, dissenters may choose any means of expression: verbal, written, or symbolic. Many dissenters give contrarian messages as part of normal and expected communication in their jobs. Others may be motivated by anger, malice, and revenge as they express their dissent (Martin 2008, 26). Some of these lower motivations may be expressed as organizational members are not always kind to those carrying messages challenging the status quo. Therefore, some dissenters speak out of personal hurt received during these difficult moments in organizational life. Heifetz and Laurie (2001) pointed out that organizational leaders must be prepared to coach dissenters, as the dissenters’ frustration level can affect the quality of their communication.



Kassing traced the movement of dissent from initial thought to expression. First, the phenomenon that is perceived as a deviation from organizational ideals or mission becomes a “triggering event” (Kassing 1997, 322). After Kassing’s “triggering event,” dissenters will assess the communication climate by determining whether they will be perceived as constructive or adversarial as they communicate their message. Additionally, dissenters will assess the risk of retaliation by organizational leaders. The dissenters’ conclusions from these assessments will govern the communication strategy and the final expression of dissent (*ibid.*, 325).

Kassing explained dissent strategy using three categories to qualify the dissenter’s expressions: “articulated dissent,” “antagonistic dissent,” and “displaced dissent” (Kassing 1997, 326–27). According to Kassing, the dissenter may use an “articulated” (*ibid.*, 326) form of dissent if the contrarian message will be perceived as constructive to organizational life and the chance of retaliation is small. The dissenter is committed to organizational ideals, and the aim of the message is to effect change within the organization using existing channels. Kassing suggested that articulated dissent has a strong likelihood of influencing organizational change (*ibid.*).

According to Kassing, if the dissenting message will be judged as a threat by organizational leaders, yet the risk of retaliation remains low, the dissenter may still voice the issues within the organization. Although the dissenter may still voice these issues, the expression of dissent is likely to be more self-centered than organizationally centered. Kassing called this “antagonistic dissent” (Kassing 1997, 326). Because of the adversarial position of dissenters and organizational leaders, only the most self-advancing aspects of an issue are voiced. Additionally, the message may not ever be delivered to those who might make a difference, but only to those who are powerless to translate the message into anything valuable to the organization (*ibid.*, 327).

When the dissenting message both is deemed adversarial and risks organizational retaliation, the dissenting message may be “displaced” by communicating it outside of the organization or to powerless organizational audiences (Kassing 1997, 327). These messages rarely initiate change and perhaps are never meant to properly influence the organization, but to only satisfy other purposes (*ibid.*, 372).

Using Kassing’s dissent model as a lens, leaders may begin to see how an ineffective approach to dissent can prevent important information from entering organizational systems. Within the organizational surround, the dissenter might see what the organization cannot or will not acknowledge



within its institutional structures and patterns of constraint. Therefore, effective leadership of “articulated dissent” may become a means of gaining innovative insight into internal and external organizational issues (Kassing 1997, 326).

LEADING AND MANAGING DISSENT

According to Heifetz and Laurie (2001), an organizational leader may be rewarded with innovative insight by translating dissent into constructive organizational interaction. Responsive dissenters may be important to the organization since they may see what other organizational members have missed due to their satisfaction with the status quo (Kassing 1997; Kotter 1996). These contrarian voices of dissent often come from the extremes of organizational life and are easy to dismiss (Heifetz and Laurie 2001, 137). They can be dismissed because dissenters are often seen as outliers and at times even accused of organizational heresy and rebellion (Martin 2008, 24–25). A markedly different view is held of those who are compliant and supportive of organizational protocol. These members are sometimes viewed as loyal and selfless participants in organizational life. Some have observed that although compliant members may be selflessly loyal, there are times when dissenters should be seen as the champions of organizational purposes since they are the ones who risk their status by speaking out against the dysfunctional status quo (Hamel Guzley 2008, 56; Sunstein 2003, 6, 210). Those seeking to preserve organizational equilibrium may not be acting selflessly or have the organizational mission at heart, but be concerned only with the preservation of what is convenient to their perceived organizational paradigm (Hamel and Guzley 2008, 56). The dissenting members within an organization may be some of the most loyal members, committed to organizational ideals. Their risk-taking ventures in articulated dissent become tangible evidence of their commitment (Kassing 1997, 325). In order to take full advantage of this expression of organizational commitment, administrators could orient organizational structures and leadership styles to capture these important messages.

According to Banks (2008), as well as Heifetz and Laurie (2001), organizational leaders may be well served by doing all they can to capture dissenting messages. Heifetz and Laurie (2001), along with Kassing (1997), pointed out the need to coach the dissenters before antagonistic forces



influence them to exit the organizational community. Heifetz and Laurie also suggested that an essential role of leadership is one of drawing out, protecting, and developing dissenters. A dissenting voice keeps the members of an organization alert and gives important information to progressive leaders. Additionally, Heifetz and Laurie pointed out the structural and personal difficulties of drawing out dissenting voices. When dissent is ignored, messengers of dissent may be hurt by the response of organizational members. This hurt can lead to the use of uncivil and ineffective communication styles. According to Heifetz and Laurie, one of the practical acts of leadership is the ability to give the dissenter's message legitimacy even though the dissenter may have difficulty expressing the message in a civil tone (Heifetz and Laurie 2001, 137). It appears that when organizational leaders create a safe environment for dissenters, new knowledge may be released into the organizational systems. In addition, new organizational leaders may be developed.

Kassing noted that dissenters may look to see whether organizational leadership will value them as people with a constructive message for the organization, or conclude that they are just more adversaries of the status quo. Dissenters also ask whether delivering the contrarian message is worth the relational and corporate risk. The position of organizational leadership on these issues will decide whether the dissent message will be articulated within the organization and available to advance organizational life, or whether it will be lost as the dissenters exit the system (Kassing 1997, 325—27). Banks (2008) suggested it is in the best interest of organizational leadership to encourage an organizational culture that preserves both message and messenger. Perhaps the means of rescuing both message and messenger is captured in the dissenter's question: Is the message and the messenger valued? (Kassing 1997). With this in mind, a closer look at how organizational and leadership values interact with dissent messages may provide useful insights into stewarding newly created knowledge that emerges in the midst of dissent. If dissenting messages are valued, more "articulated dissent" (Kassing 1997) may be encouraged within a receptive system.

According to Bandura, behavior can be affected by values (Bandura 1986, 25). Therefore, strategies for organizational and individual leadership may be directed by their values (Fernández and Hogan 2002, 26). The values driving leadership behavior and interactions within the organization deserve careful consideration.



VALUES GIVE DIRECTION TO LEADING AND MANAGING DISSENT

Leveraging dissent into useful organizational information may require organizational restructuring, but before mechanical changes are made, the heart of the leader may also need to be changed. Block expressed himself pointedly when he wrote, “If there is no transformation inside each of us, all the structural change in the world will have no impact on our institutions” (Block 1993, 77). Lowney continued this theme when he asserted, “Leadership begins with self-leadership” (Lowney 2003, 9). According to Thompson, organizational members may be looking for ways to align their values with organizational values. When individuals allow their own respect for human dignity and democratic processes to affect their work life, a new energy is released into the workplace (Thompson 2000, 10).

Leading dissenters may not simply consist of a discussion about technique and technical analysis, but perhaps may be best initiated by clarifying values. According to Fernández and Hogan, it is quality values that influence leaders toward sound choices (Fernández and Hogan 2002, 25). Since this influence may have an impact upon many parts of the organization, the potential importance of this interactivity warrants further consideration. According to Kuhn, modern organizational systems are highly interconnected and interactive; therefore, principles of complexity may yield new insights into the emergence of organizational phenomena (Kuhn 2007, 164). Consequently, complexity theory may give insight into the interactions of personal and organizational values with dissent messages.

COMPLEXITY THEORIES GIVE MEANING TO THE INTERACTIONS OF VALUES AND DISSENT

Although a complete understanding of complexity is elusive, Marion attempted to define complexity theory as “the study of dynamic behaviors of complexly interacting, interdependent, and adaptive agents under conditions of internal and external pressure” (Marion 2008, 3). Complexity theory allows organizational leaders to view organizational phenomena, such as dissent, as “emergent,” or the unique product formed by countless organizational interactions (ibid., 9). The concept of emergence aligns with Kassing’s model of dissent’s origin. Dissent emerges from observing the interactions of unexpected or unacknowledged organizational behavior. Because of these interactions, dissenting thought introduces a challenge to the status quo. Although this interactive and emergent phenomenon may at



first reside only within the mind of the dissenter, Kassing has made it clear that the dissenting thought will not remain in the mind of the dissenter, but will be expressed. These expressions are new agents bringing more interactivity to the organizational system.

In the midst of this interactivity, according to Wheatley, living systems, for example, organizations, must decide whether new variations and interactions are relevant. Wheatley also noted that relevance, or what the system deems important, is largely based upon the system's sense of identity (Wheatley 1999, 146). Although there are many influences upon this sense of identity, the influence of values has behavioral consequences (Fernández and Hogan 2002, 26). Systems, whether individual or organizational, respond to the circumstantial feedback or variant interaction evoked during the normal course of operation. When a variation or something new enters the system, its relevance may challenge the status quo to the point of inspiring a change in the present system status (Axelrod and Cohen 2000, 117–18; Wheatley 1999, 79–80). Complexity theorists call this process *self-organization* (Marion 2008, 6).

A dissenting message is new information supplied to the system. If this contrarian message is significant (or relevant), it will introduce perturbations within the system and cause the system to adapt. If the system “values” the message as constructive, the system will use appropriate resources to accommodate the dissenting message and change. If the system likewise “values” the status quo more than the implications of the dissenting messages, the system will rally itself against these messages in order to restore the system to the status quo (Heifetz et al. 2009, 38; Wheatley 1999, 79). Therefore, complexity dynamics such as self-organization can be used to demonstrate the power of values to influence a constructive response to dissent messages.

A value-laden approach to leadership may prove an effective approach to capturing articulated dissent. Servant-leadership is one such approach to leadership. The work of Greenleaf and Spears demonstrates its ability to deliver a values approach to leadership on both an individual and an organizational level that may influence the effective leadership of dissenters and their message.

OPERATIONALIZING VALUES: DISSENT AND SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Servant-leadership is more a set of values than it is a leadership methodology (Greenleaf 2002; Spears 2004). Greenleaf explained that a servant-leader “*is servant first*” (Greenleaf 2002, 27; italics in original).



He continued this emphasis on identity and values when he noted, “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*” (ibid.; italics in original). This primary value and sense of identity are powerful influences upon the actions of a leader and, by extension, the organization (Fernández and Hogan 2002, 26). Through analyzing Greenleaf’s original essays and his subsequent writings, Spears has listed the values of servant-leadership as listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears 2004, 13–16).

Although it would be fruitful to discuss the interactions of each of the servant-leadership values articulated by Spears in relation to the phenomenon of dissent, in this paper the servant-leadership values of self-awareness and listening will be examined. These two values may have a large impact on dissenters as the strategy for expressing dissent is formed. According to Kassing, the dissenter assesses whether the communication climate of the organization will allow for the favorable reception of a contrarian message. Since this climate will influence how the dissenter inevitably expresses dissent, it is incumbent upon organizational leaders to assure potential dissenters that they and their messages will be respected. Greenleaf indicated that self-awareness might heighten a leader’s ability to value contrarian voices (Greenleaf 2002, 41). Additionally, Greenleaf called for listening to be the servant-leader’s first act when facing problematic circumstances (ibid., 31). In light of Greenleaf’s primary emphasis on listening, this value-laden act may be important for servant-leaders as they seek to understand dissent messages.

AWARENESS

According to Kassing, dissent begins within the inner world of the individual as the dissenter observes behavior within the organization that deviates from the expected ideals of the organization. Perhaps one of the keys in a leader’s response to dissenters and their contrarian messages also begins with the inner world of the leader through self-awareness.

The inner world of the leader may be critical for both personal and societal change (Ferch 2011, 21). A dissenting message is a call for change, and without the cultivation of the leader’s inner world, a constructive response to contrarian messages may not be offered. Greenleaf valued the inner world of a leader by beginning with “self” as problems were analyzed: “If a flaw



in the world is to be remedied, to the servant the process of change starts in here, in the servant, not out there” (Greenleaf 2002, 57). Self-awareness may allow a contrarian message to be relevant to, and therefore received by, an organizational leader. This receptivity may encourage continued conversation between dissenter and organizational leader. Goleman suggested that self-aware individuals are hungry for critique (Goleman 2004, 85). Rather than seeing contrarian messages as a sign of failure, they may see these messages as an opportunity for personal or perhaps even organizational innovation. Heifetz et al. continued this theme by referring to dissenters as potential “canaries in the coal mine” (Heifetz et al. 2009, 145). Just as canaries warn miners of toxic gases that are beyond the reach of a miner’s immediate senses, so the awareness of dissenting message may be equally important to organizational leaders. Receiving these contrarian messages amid a growing self-awareness may provide the leader with a better understanding of the organization and its members.

Goleman described self-awareness as being aware of how one’s thoughts and feelings affect the perceptions of self, others, organizational circumstances, and job performance (Goleman 2004, 84). Goleman pointed out that many managers dismiss the importance of self-awareness because of its subjective nature and seeming impracticality (ibid., 85). Goleman’s research tied self-awareness and its larger construct, emotional intelligence, directly to effective leadership (ibid., 82).

Webbeke further demonstrated the practicality of self-awareness as a scholar of intercultural leadership. Drawing upon the increasing globalization of organizational activity, she places the concept of self-awareness into a global context since it plays a critical role in developing intercultural competence. Webbeke defined the utility of self-awareness in a leader’s abilities to think objectively, relate skillfully, and analyze perceptively:

The point of consciousness, or self-awareness, is to use it as a tool of exploration, receptivity, and compassion rather than as a device for self-judgment and self-loathing—it is not another channel for your internal critic. Self-awareness is a reflective practice meant to be a means to enhance your intentionality, higher order thinking, and interpersonal skills. Despite what you may think, interpersonal skill begins with learning how to interact effectively with *yourself*. Largely, self-awareness is an internal process; however, its effect is to both, relationship with self, and relationship with others. The objective is actually to become more, *you*. Paradoxically, the more you understand yourself, the more open and receptive you can be with other people. (Webbeke 2009, 100)



The utility of self-awareness might aid servant leaders seeking personal as well as organizational objectivity. Given the complex organizational and personal issues associated with leading dissenters, the ability to objectify the thoughts and dispositions of those delivering and receiving contrarian messages could prove helpful. Greenleaf emphasized the importance of self-awareness in the complex circumstances of leadership. He observed,

Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity. (Greenleaf 2002, 41)

Self-awareness may be an important preparation for the “able” leader’s potential understanding of contrarian messages (ibid.).

Developing self-awareness is not simply a personal and private affair. Greenleaf suggested that self-awareness might emerge as a function of time and conversation with those of diverse views. He explained, “A qualification for leadership is that one can tolerate a sustained wide span of awareness so that one better ‘sees it as it is’” (Greenleaf 2002, 41). Diverse relationships and conversations that challenge the servant-leader can be constructively disruptive. Heifetz et al. called this kind of disruption and the resulting disequilibrium a “zone for productivity” (Heifetz et al. 2009, 30). Because of the self-awareness values the servant-leader maintains and the disequilibrium that dissent fosters, an unexamined satisfaction with the status quo is minimized (Kotter 1996). Kotter identified this kind of “complacency” as the enemy of innovation since it erodes the awareness of relevant and productive novelty (Kotter 1996, 36). Since one of the potential values of dissenting conversation is the potential for innovation, then dissent should be the kind of event that Wheatley (1999) argues would disturb both the personal and organizational systems of the leader. With this disruption, the leader is conditioned by self-awareness and may be better able to hear and respect contrarian messages.

The readiness to hear and learn allows for the development of a foundation of respect (Isaacs, 1999, 114). Kassing noted the need of the dissenter to be viewed favorably by organizational leaders when hearing a contrarian message. Perhaps after self-awareness, the leader’s ability to greet the dissenter with a listening ear is the next step in the emerging drama of articulated organizational dissent amid servant-leadership values. This interactive dialogue has potential for revealing innovative organizational insight as well as uncovering potential organizational leaders.



LISTENING

Listening, according to Spears (personal communication, June 20, 2009), is the largest and most important of the servant-leadership values. Spears continued by pointing out that listening is an act of the will searching for the truth in the present circumstances. Listening requires a selfless moment to understand another person and his or her circumstances. Although the servant-leader does not seek to understand only for his own benefit, the servant-leader also helps others within the organization to understand themselves as well (Spears, personal communication, January 29, 2010).

What the dissenter may want most is someone who will listen and attempt to understand. According to Kassing, it is the individual's attention to something contrary to what was expected that gave rise to the dissenting thought (Kassing 1997, 318–19). Greenleaf reported, "I have a bias about this which suggests that only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first...true listening builds strength in other people" (Greenleaf 2002, 31). Listening allows the leader to "identify the will of a group and helps clarify that will" (Spears 2004, 13). By listening, the servant-leader first acknowledges the dignity and legitimacy of the dissenter. Banks argued that the leader's openness to dissent is a means of imparting trust and courage while in the midst of organizationally relevant conversation (Banks 2008, 229). Banks further appealed to the ethic of reciprocity to advance the conversation as well as the level of relational authenticity with the dissenter (*ibid.*). According to Banks, as the leader shows trust and courage by being open to contrarian messages, those carrying the message may be more likely to demonstrate their trust and courage by speaking up.

Brunner advanced the value of listening and leadership by looking to the nature of good working relationships. Brunner's study asked "public relations and communication employees and managers about what makes for successful business/organizational relationships" (Brunner 2008, 75). The answers given by those interviewed revealed behaviors almost universally involving listening, trust, and communication (*ibid.*, 78). Brunner concluded that "active listening and communication are essential for successful business/organizational relationships to be built and maintained" (*ibid.*, 77). It seems clear from Brunner's work that the servant-leadership value of listening might be a critical interactive agent in the fruitful use of organizational dissent.



On the contrary, when trust and listening are absent or violated, the ability to constructively capture the information surfaced in dissent may be impossible. Fairhurst and Zoller stated that when leaders do not listen to dissent, organizational relationships are compromised. In these compromised relationships, unruly emotions have the potential to influence the communication process negatively (Fairhurst and Zoller 2008, 144). Without listening to diverse and dissenting voices, leaders may not make good leadership choices (Banks 2008, 230). Although the servant-leader values diversity in the development of self-awareness (Greenleaf 2002, 41), the value of diversity may also extend to the discipline of listening. Greenleaf asked servant-leaders, “Are we really listening? Are we listening to the one with whom we want to communicate? Is our basic attitude, as we approach the confrontation, one of wanting to understand?” (ibid. 31). Greenleaf’s value-laden approach to leadership suggests that listening is a moral imperative.

With listening as an apparent moral imperative, servant-leaders may be tempted to suspend their own thinking in order to honor the dissenter or anyone else speaking within the organization. To the contrary, Spears argued for the leader to carefully listen to his or her own inner voice and give it legitimacy, even while listening to others (Spears 2004, 31). The self has a voice in every circumstance. That voice may be carrying wisdom or folly. In either case, it cannot be denied. If wisdom is spoken, it must be embraced. If the inner voice utters folly, it too must be acknowledged and made captive to the greater good.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to discuss the relationship of servant-leadership values associated with Greenleaf (2002) and Spears (2004) with the effective leadership of organizational dissent. Servant-leadership may provide the values framework for leading dissenters, as well as for developing the authentic relationships required for the effective organizational use of their messages.

The need remains for more discussion concerning organizational dissent and the influence of servant-leadership values. Although only self-awareness and listening were considered, further study might examine how persuasion influences the robust conversations surrounding the articulation of dissent. Garner’s (2009) typology of dissent expression could provide insight into organizational preferences for dissent expression and dissent’s clearly persuasive appeal. Conceptualization and foresight might



carry innovation inspired by dissent into the future of organizational life. Stewardship and the commitment to the growth of people may impart value to the phenomenon of dissent and the place of dissenters within the organization. Finally, a robust discussion about the kind of organizational culture that would support both servant-leader and dissenter would benefit from a thoughtful dialogue about the servant-leadership values of empathy, healing, and the commitment to build community.

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