



ENHANCING SERVANT-LEADERSHIP'S PRACTICE THROUGH UTILIZATION OF AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE

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While the concept of servant-leadership dates back to biblical times more than two thousand years ago (Sendjaya and Sarros 2002, 57), it is only since the 1970s that the ideas of servant-leadership came into modern leadership scholarship through Robert Greenleaf's writings (*ibid.*). Several authors, including Gergen and Zelleke (2008), Heineman (2006), Russell and Stone (2002), and Tierney (2006) have commented on a societal leadership deficit. Wong and Davey noted that in some cases this manifests itself as a lack of interested or available leaders for a given organizational or community leadership position (Wong and Davey 2007, 1). The lack of qualified leaders results in unmet needs or the appointment of less than qualified persons to fulfill the role. Even in situations where leaders are qualified, the appointment of leaders who conduct themselves using nonrelational or authoritarian methods and who are primarily motivated by selfishness or power often denigrates followers and disengages the organization from the community (*ibid.*, 11).

Increasingly, individuals, for-profit organizations, nonprofit organizations, and other entities are disaffected toward society's leaderless path and are turning toward servant-leadership principles in an effort to co-create a more loving and humane experience for all (Spears 2010, 25, 29–30; Wong and Davey 2007, 1). Accordingly, as this humanistic and spiritual "radical approach" to organizational hierarchy and leader/follower relationships gains momentum, the beneficent transformative effects on society show great promise (Wong and Davey 2007, 3).

People expect greater participation and voice in decision making (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1981/1991, xvii). The desire for greater participation extends to the leader/follower dynamic in organizations, especially in relatively flat organizations, even when a follower's position lacks formal



managerial or leadership authority (Yankelovich 1999, 10–13). Servant-leaders, who are ready to oblige this participatory expectation, might consider utilization of authentic dialogue to advance existing servant-leadership practices. Authentic dialogue has been linked to enhanced participatory decision-making capabilities (ibid., 15, 56–57, 127), to increased subordinate voice and ownership (ibid., 41–42), and to aiding in resolving conflict (Bohm 1996, 53–54).

Covey explained that there are negative consequences for the premature use of power or formal authority and that the effectiveness of power is inverse to its use; that is, formal power's effectiveness decreases when it is used with any regularity (Covey 2002, 12). Additionally, the use of power has the potential to prevent a fostering of the deep trust needed between leader and worker to move in tandem toward an organization's goals. Servant-leadership provides individuals and organizations with constructive options to meet Greenleaf's (1997/2002) best test without the premature use of power. Greenleaf and Burns referred to leadership as "A moral contract between leaders and followers to bring out the best in each other for the good of the whole" (cited in April 1999, 232). This view sets the stage for a relationship where followers are transformed. Dialogue goes one step farther and fosters relationships that provide an opportunity for all parties to emerge transformed. My paper considers the implications of adding authentic dialogue as an enhancement to servant-leadership.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND SOCIETAL VALUE OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Servant-leadership is a paradigm shifter. Compared against previous generations of managerial practice, modern management relies more on subtle forms of coercion, manipulation, pressure, and anxiety to achieve control over increasingly sophisticated and empowered workers (Wong and Davey 2007, 1–5). Servant-leadership provides an alternative to both previous generations of management with their tyrannical, dictatorial workplaces as well as the more subtle tactical forms mentioned by Wong and Davey.

As early as 1970, Greenleaf's essay "The Servant as Leader" laid the groundwork for his seminal book *Servant-leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. In *Servant-leadership*, Greenleaf (1977/2002) argued that the "greatest threat" to society is that "we lack the *mechanism of consensus*, a way of making up our collective minds" and expressing a collective will (Greenleaf 1977/2002, 140). The



lack of ability to reach societal consensus is at least as threatening in 2012 as it was when Greenleaf issued his warning. The lack of consensus is evident in the often bitter division in U.S. politics. As indicated above, Greenleaf referred to “mechanism[s] of consensus,” or at least coming to understand one another’s positions even when a solution is untenable (ibid.). Practice of authentic dialogue could be a mechanism for servant-leaders to use in arriving at consensus.

TENETS OF AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE

April expressed concern about the loss of society’s dialogical capacity. According to April, dialogue allows “emergence of collective insight, collective wisdom, and a non-confrontational way of solving problems” (April 1999, 232). April further argued that

[o]nce a society loses this capacity, all that is left is a discussion—voices battling it out to see who wins and who loses. There is no capacity to go deeper, to find a deeper meaning that transcends individual views and self-interest. (ibid.)

In this paper, I use the term *authentic* to set true dialogue apart from the type of everyday talking or discussion that often masquerades for authentic dialogue (Yankelovich 1999, 35). In the process of relationship building with the “other” (Buber, trans. 1923/1970), authentic dialogue “expresses an essential aspect of the human spirit” (Yankelovich 1999, 15) and movement from the impersonal or adversarial “I and it” to the humanity-honoring “I and Thou” becomes possible (Buber, trans. 1923/1970). Dialogue, in Yankelovich’s words, “forges a bond between us,” (Yankelovich 1999, 15) and allows us to move from the competitive win at all costs, feared by April, to the cooperative (ibid.). Bohm (1996) proposed use of dialogue to get beyond the tit-for-tat, I win–you lose mentality of standard discussion or negotiation. Bohm explicated a number of important tenets to utilize when engaging in dialogue in order to advance an issue, build deeper trust and understanding, and to move away from the winner-take-all of traditional negotiation. Two of the critical components of Bohm’s dialogue are (1) suspend role and status (Bohm 1996, 48–49); and (2) release the need for a specific outcome (ibid., 19).

According to Bohm, role and status conveyed through formal positions, authority, and labeling potentially interferes with the ability to negotiate an



agreement (Bohm 1996, 48–49). Eliminating these formal roles can advance an authentic dialoguing process with the potential for freer engagement and understanding of issues (Yankelovich 1999, 41–43). Bohm argued that if more time were spent in an informal non-authority-driven authentic dialogue setting, even utilizing egalitarian seating arrangements; greater progress and a decrease in overall hostility could be achieved (Bohm 1996, 17). Authentic dialogue offers more potential for success when the involved parties enter into the process with open minds and a willingness to suspend assumptions (Yankelovich 1999, 44–46). Any outcome goal held before entering into dialogue threatens to erode the process and privileges one position over another. Although practice of authentic dialogue is meant to be separate from a decision-making process, dialogue often paves the way for a decision to occur (Bohm 1996, 19; Yankelovich 1999, 15). Heath et al. further reinforced dialogue’s importance to decision making and resolving conflicts:

From my experience, I know that it is very difficult to come to any “resolution” (whatever that might mean) without dialogue. If we try, we simply reproduce the same old pattern of (choose your label) reciprocated diatribe, debate, moral conflict, and so forth in which positions harden, discourse attenuates, and words are used as swords and clubs rather than invitations.... There is something powerful in dialogue that is not intended to produce resolutions of conflict but that increases the possibility that we will. When we are in dialogic relationships with others, we can develop much richer relationships. (Heath et al. 2006, 356)

Additionally, authentic dialogue bridges the false dichotomous gap U.S. society has created between what Yankelovich called “‘subjective’ values and [the] ‘objective’ facts,” employed in deliberative processes (Yankelovich 1999, 25–26). Utilization of feelings and values opens the door to inclusion of every person’s diverse viewpoints and could lead to more humane processes and decisions (ibid.). The next section considers connection points between servant-leadership and authentic dialogue.

INTERSECTIONS OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE

Many leaders and organizations are moving toward servant-leadership away from a more traditional power and hierarchy-based exercise of leadership (Spears 2010, 26). Nair (cited in Russell and Stone 2002, 145) clarified that “even though power will always be associated with leadership, it only



has one legitimate use: service.” Robert Greenleaf captured the essence of servant-leadership:

The servant-leader *is* servant first....It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such, it will be a later choice to serve—after leadership is established....The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. (Greenleaf 1977/2002, 27)

Whether an individual identifies their desire to serve as “servant-leadership” or only heeds the call to serve, the individual will manifest the characteristics of servant-leadership identified in the literature. Spears identified ten characteristics in Greenleaf’s writings: (1) listening; (2) empathy; (3) healing; (4) awareness; (5) persuasion; (6) conceptualization; (7) foresight; (8) stewardship; (9) commitment to the growth of people; and (10) building community (Spears 1998, 3–6). While all of the above characteristics are important to servant-leadership’s practice, several intersect with characteristics of authentic dialogue’s practice. In particular, (1) listening with empathy; (2) persuasion; (3) stewardship; and (4) commitment to the growth of people and building community coincide with and have potential to advance servant-leadership’s practice. The remainder of this section describes each of the concepts.

Listening With Empathy

Spears offered that leaders’ “communication and decision-making skills...need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others. The servant-leader seeks to identify the will of a group and helps to clarify that will” (Spears 2010, 27). Active, empathetic listening is critical to servant-leadership. Spears further observed:

Listening is a choice; a choice that involves developing the ability to listen for the truth of each situation. Listening for the truth (the essence of the issue) involves a quality of presence (awareness-wisdom), a natural human ability, that allows us to intuitively and compassionately hear, see and know what the real issue is—and the ability (with a few words) to bring others to awareness and understanding of the issue. This is a



learned skill and I think a desirable gift for anyone involved in leadership.
(L. C. Spears, personal communication, February 19, 2011)

ADDITIONALLY, FERCH OFFERED:

At the core of servant-leadership is the uncommon and enduring notion of listening, even in the dark of our own difficulties. Deep listening. The etymology of to listen is to obey. The root meaning invokes our obedience. Not to listen, in the original sense, meant to be absurd. (Ferch 2011, xxviii)

As described above by both Ferch and Spears, leaders can make the choice to embrace listening empathetically to those whom they serve (Ferch 2011, xxviii; L. Spears, personal communication, February 19, 2011). Leaders have the ability to foster active listening and authentic dialogue skills within their units or organizations through numerous opportunities to candidly and openmindedly listen to peers, subordinates, other institutional leaders, and even to outside constituencies or community members who bring diverse perspectives to bear (Wong and Davey 2007, 3). The expectation has been the leader already holds all of the good ideas and does not need to listen, compromise, and engage in interchange. However, Beck found that effective “leaders are characterized by interpersonal competence,” and have active listening and empathy as significant components of their competency (Beck 2010, 70).

Heath et al. noted that dialogue’s “orientation is toward mutual understanding...rather than strategic self-interest” (Heath et al. 2006, 370). Accordingly, authentic dialogue requires active listening with empathy. Yankelovich observed that leaders need to hear “what other people are trying to say, as opposed to reacting to their literal words” (Yankelovich 1999, 135). Yankelovich further observed that preestablished positions and envisioning the rebuttal, while concurrently involved in conversation, prevents individuals from clearly and deeply listening. Engaging in an authentic dialogical process requires actively listening to, empathizing with, and learning the needs and wants of the counterpart, and active listening needs to take precedence over issuing demands and staking entrenched ill-considered positions (ibid., 42–44). When an active listening approach is taken seriously, significant progress toward greater understanding can result, and can contribute to the type of authentic humanity honoring “I and Thou” relationships that Buber (1923/1970) described.



Persuasion

Spears, in a clear break from traditional leadership paradigms, argued, “The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance....The servant-leader is effective at building consensus within groups” (Spears 2010, 28). Wong and Davey offered further that servant-leadership “is about influence rather than power and control” (Wong and Davey 2007, 10), and “is about creating a climate of love rather than a culture of fear” (ibid., 11). Wong and Davey were explicit that servant-leadership “is about listening rather than giving orders” (ibid.). Greenleaf argued that anyone can give orders and enforce his/her will punitively in a culture of fear, but a servant-leader grows others and compels them to service through his or her example (Greenleaf 1997/2002, 27). Servant-leaders have the obligation to engage followers in as inclusive and humane manner as is possible (Wong and Davey 2007, 3). Persuasion and authentic dialogue can flourish in an environment where “equality and the absence of coercive influences” prevails (Yankelovich 1999, 41). When entered into dialogue an environment is co created where everyone’s ideas can be openly presented without the formal leader’s position being coercively privileged over others’ ideas and concerns. Use of persuasion shows value for the contributions of all team members and honors the relationship that is critical to an organization’s success.

Stewardship

Spears noted that an assumption of stewardship was that “CEO’s, staffs, and trustees all played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society” (Spears 2010, 29). Spears then noted, “Servant-leadership, like stewardship, assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others. Stewardship also emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion, rather than control” (ibid.). Servant-leaders are often attracted to leadership positions through a sense of honoring, serving, taking care of, or giving back to their colleagues and organizations (Greenleaf 1997/2002, 27). The ideas stated above describe an aspect of or a way to steward that which one holds important. Gaining an understanding of your organization’s essence, learning what is vitally important to its members, or uncovering the nuances that make the organization special, could allow leaders to empathize with and serve the needs of those whom they lead.



Authentic dialogue is a natural extension of servant-leadership's stewardship characteristic. Regular use of authentic dialogue invests in people and the organization and certainly furthers a servant-leader's stewardship of an organization's human resources by providing followers and leaders with formal opportunities to invest in organizational stewardship (Russell and Stone 2002, 149). Block (as cited in Russell and Stone 2002) described stewardship as "choosing partnership over patriarchy" (ibid.). Choosing partnership over patriarchy is consistent with authentic dialogue's egalitarian emphasis on the suspension of role and status and on releasing the need for a specific outcome. As suggested by Wong and Davey, "Leaders humanize the workplace when they treat subordinates as human beings, worthy of unconditional dignity and respect" (Wong and Davey 2007, 3). As a process, authentic dialogue's practice advances humanity's and organizational stewardship by holding people and their contributions in trust so all may benefit.

COMMITMENT TO THE GROWTH OF PEOPLE AND BUILDING COMMUNITY

According to Spears, servant-leaders show their commitment to the growth of people primarily by believing

that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within his or her organization. The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything in his or her power to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues. (Spears 2010, 29)

As indicated above by Spears, nurturing the leaders and emerging leaders who are engaged with a servant-leader is among the servant-leader's greatest responsibilities and purposes. As such, organizations practicing servant-leadership are incubators for growth of people.

Spears asserted that the rise of large institutions has resulted in a loss of community (Spears 2010, 29). Greenleaf identified the loss of community in his writings (Greenleaf 1970/1991, 28, 30). Other writers, including Putnam (2000), have commented on the loss of community more recently. While strongly individualistic at the personal level, collective U.S. society has been built upon community and charitable nonprofit institutions carrying out many safety net functions often provided by government in other developed countries (Chhokar, Brodbeck, and House 2008, 475–530). Greenleaf



further offered that a servant-leader can reestablish greater community involvement by “demonstrating his or her unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group” (Greenleaf 1997/2002, 53). Loss of community has potential to alter the fabric of U.S. culture and the social safety net.

Servant-leaders are at the heart of efforts to build community and are well suited to lead in this area. Dialogue also can aid servant-leaders in building community. As noted by Yankelovich, regular dialogue builds connections, fosters relationships, and can remove institutional barriers to community that may otherwise serve to reinforce natural tendencies for the silo effect to take root (Yankelovich 1999, 15). Employee and community commitment to the organization as a specific tight-knit community or even as a family can be strengthened by dialogue’s practice. Bringing assumptions into the open and suspending judgment precipitates greater openness and allows the “other” to engage deeply even when viewpoints diametrically antithetical to one’s own convictions are expressed (*ibid.*, 14–15). Heath et al. explained further that “[w]hat makes dialogue truly unique is not the content but the process. Dialogue is relational. It may not result in a solution to the identified problem but rather...[may result] in a relational resolution that develops from understanding each other’s emotions, values, interests, and positions” (Heath et al. 2006, 367–68). Authentic dialogue provides the necessary space to embrace the other and build sustained community in ways that other forms of communication such as debate and argumentation are unable to match.

APPLICATIONS TO LEADERSHIP—THE 2011 FEDERAL DEBT CRISIS

As previously introduced, several authors have noted concern about the leadership deficit facing the United States including Gergen and Zelleke (2008), Heineman (2006), Russell and Stone (2002), Tierney (2006), and Wong and Davey (2007). This societal leadership deficit can be found in the federal government and can often result in unmet needs and leaders who conduct themselves in a nonrelational manner toward both their subordinates and their peers. As noted by Heath et al. factious disagreement is not unusual in difficult times:

But we may in troubled times be less human because it is so easy to be partisan. We tend to look for the quality of our ideas and deny that in others with whom we disagree. Can we hear and listen to others neutrally? As I have thought about this manner, it seems we may have several opportunities for dialogue, perhaps simultaneously (Heath et al. 2006, 353).



Federal elected representatives often engage in protracted positional negotiation instead of solving the problems of their constituents (Beinart 2010, para. 2; Brazeal 2009, 1). Such behavior serves to divide community and consolidate power. Indeed, as Rousseau noted more than two hundred years ago, it seems that “it is not necessary to assemble anyone for this: on the contrary, the subjects have to be kept scattered; this is the first maxim of modern politics” (Rousseau 1998, 332). Mistrust feeds a breakdown of community (Beinart 2010, para. 3, 4). The breakdown of community is particularly unfortunate when community may be all that is left for some people. Instead of embracing community, there is a tendency to blame the other. As Senge argued, “There is no separate ‘other’” to blame as we all inhabit the same system” (Senge 1990/2006, 67). Senge further argued that the systemic cure to the lack of community “lies in your relationship with your ‘enemy’” (ibid.).

The 2011 federal debt crisis provided an opportunity to illustrate the importance of utilizing a people-centered, dialogical servant-led approach. Discussion about the debt crisis used positional negotiation techniques and focused on brinksmanship, demagoguery, and winner take all (Brazeal 2009, 1). The outcome, while possibly politically expedient, is unlikely to provide a platform for a more comprehensive structural solution to U.S. debt problems. Fisher et al. encouraged separating concerns about people from the problems at hand, an approach that has the potential to lead to outcomes that are tough on the problem while affirming the basic dignity of the persons and ideas involved (Fisher et al. 1981/1991, xviii, 17–39). It is possible that a servant-leadership approach, sensitive to Covey’s concern regarding the premature use of power (Covey 2002, 12), and employing authentic dialogue would have provided different results.

CONCLUSIONS

According to Wong and Davey, “What we need most are servant-leaders with exceptional abilities blended with hearts full of humility and love. Such leaders can make this world a better place and restore people’s hope in the future” (Wong and Davey 2007, 11). Similarly, SanFacon and Spears offered, “At its core, servant-leadership is a long term, transformative approach to life and work—a way of being—that has great potential for creating positive, non-violent change throughout our society and the world” (SanFacon and Spears 2008, 4). Authentic dialogue is similarly transformative (Bohm



1996, 27; Yankelovich 1999, 214–18) and has the potential to advance servant-leadership's practice.

Boyd suggested that "Greenleaf was convinced that leaders of substance are people whose primary motivation is a deep desire to serve.... These servant-leaders are empowered to lead by those around them because they believe leadership is more a way of living than a management strategy" (Boyd 2008, 12). Servant-leadership is not just another strategy to execute, and it is not about the short term bottom line, it is about people first. If you are focused on serving those you lead, profitability will come eventually, and those profits that do arrive will take the form of improved human resources as well as the traditional form of monetary profit. Servant-leadership, if truly embraced, will begin providing concrete examples of transformative organizational change, and genuine embrace of the servant example will attract interesting and creative people to the organization. Improvements in servant-leadership's practice will require changes in organizational communication, and dialogue should be part of the change. According to Ford and Ford, "Communication, conversation and dialogue are the contexts in which change occurs. Change is a communication-based and communication-driven phenomenon" (cited in April 1999, 239). Dialogue's role in this process should not be understated.

Like servant-leadership, authentic dialogue requires a leveling of hierarchy (Yankelovich 1999, 41–43). The leveling of hierarchy runs contrary to traditional command and control management methodologies (San Juan 2005, 189). Authentic dialogue combined with servant-leadership provides the potential to enhance servant-leadership organizationally. Adding authentic dialogue to the servant-leader's repertoire fosters an environment conducive to greater stakeholder commitment, improved morale, and an opportunity for greater creativity and problem solving through wider collaboration. Ultimately, dialogue's use by servant-leaders could allow for more widely embraced decision making and more humane outcomes. Further research in the area of dialogue and servant-leadership is needed to move beyond a conceptual understanding of authentic dialogue's potential benefits in its application to servant-leadership. Additional research could determine if authentic dialogue's utilization by servant-leaders and servant-led organizations affects their leadership practices and outcomes.



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