Faith and Learning

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Authors Note

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Abstract

Thousands of leadership studies have been done over the decades. A cursory search of the biblical and scholarly literature will show a proliferation of servant leadership studies with well over a hundred published in the last five years alone. Still, a lack of clarity and coherence around the construct has impeded its theory development. For this paper, servant leadership and spiritual leadership were explored to build effective teams in an organization. An exploration of the field of study is done as to how it relates to highly effective teams and successful workplace projects. Primary considerations are outlined in how to create best and sustain workplace teams and how faith and scripture can be integrated using the Jennings and Stahl-wert text to provide a cohesive understanding of why the servant leader is significant in advancing God's purpose for team leadership and how these are applied using real-world examples to the author's continued journey in developing a Christian worldview and sound leadership principles.

Keywords: faith and business, servant leadership, team management, team building, biblical integration

Faith and Learning

Thousands of leadership studies have been conducted, but the varieties of leadership constructs that have been utilized make it challenging to compare the results of the research (Bass, 2008; Yukl, 2012; as cited in Babyak, 2018) Rost (1991; as cited in Babyak, 2018) suggests that a standard definition of leadership cannot simply be reached amongst scholars because it is a highly complex concept that will continue to change with global and generational differences in society. Therefore, servant leadership and spiritual leadership were explored for this paper to build effective teams in an organization.

A cursory search of the literature will show a proliferation of servant leadership studies with well over a hundred published in the last five years alone. Still, a lack of clarity and coherence around the construct has impeded its theory development (Eva et al., 2019). In their study, the authors argue that evolutionary leadership biology has existed since the needs of hunter-gatherer tribes who relied on each other. Over time, this process has been developed into organizations based on a "filling the gap" model by building a sense of social identity in their followers (Chen, Zhu, 7 Zhou, 2015; as cited in Eva et al., 2019). This, in turn, created teams that are more like the kinship found in those earliest family-like tribes and built on the capacity to assist others. Thus, servant leadership, paired with spirituality and aspects of transformational leadership, can deliver an approach that can develop with the challenges of the modern workplace while still providing on the hunter-gatherer needs of belonging (Eva et al., 2019). Several of today's most respected companies rely on this leadership model, Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Zappos, and Marriott, to name a few (Eva et al., 2019).

Servant leadership is a holistic approach that engages followers in multiple dimensions (e.g., relational, ethical, emotional, spiritual). They are empowered to grow into what they can

become (Eva et al., 2019). This leadership theory seeks first and foremost to develop followings based on leaders' altruistic and ethical orientations (Greenleaf 1997; as cited in Babyak, 2018). Furthermore, the biblical and scholarly literature of spiritual leadership is represented but not as broadly as other leadership disciplines. Fry (2003; as cited in Babyak, 2018) postulates that Americans desperately seek an increased spiritual dimension that results in authentic leadership at work. Up to this point, the church has done very little to support this movement (Miller, 2003; as cited in Babyak, 2018). The traditional, secular viewpoint is that one's faith should remain private at work (Cooling, 2010; as cited in Babyak, 2018). But that appears to be changing. In colleges and universities, such as here at Liberty University and around the country, course work and research are being done to propel the need to learn how to live in a consistent life that ties their religious and work lives together (Bygrave & Macmillan, 2008; as cited in Babyak, 2018).

Benefiel (2005; as cited in Babyak, 2018) notes that scholars who have developed spiritual leadership have been well-trained in the leadership realm but have lacked the necessary training and scholarly insights for the spiritual and religious part of spiritual leadership to make spiritual leadership a viable theory. Fry (2003; as cited in Babyak, 2018) notes that an understanding of religion is essential for spiritual leadership because religion involves spirituality, but spirituality does not need to involve religion, making it possible for leaders to exhibit spiritual leadership without a religious foundation. This is notable because this author struggles with spiritual leadership. As a person who grew up in a non-religious family, it has taken years to come to terms with the idea of a Christian worldview in his writings and research studies in this Doctor of Strategic Leadership program. Thereby the ideas of Freeman (2011; as cited in Babyak, 2018) can be suggested to purport the idea that spiritual leaders should

encourage followers to incorporate their faith and hope in God at work as they help create a higher calling, as servant leaders, in their work as they serve God.

The relevant and timely research of Bilal et al. (2020) took the aspects of a servant leader and spiritual leadership and examined the impact of project leaders' leadership style on project team effectiveness via team goal clarity and team process clarity within the project based organizational context. This new follower-centric, servant leadership model is shown in their results. Their findings suggest that servant leadership has a positive and significant impact on a team's effectiveness and that there are myriad opportunities for future research. For example, one suggestion could examine the effect of a moderator's role regarding the climate of the relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness (Bilal et al., 2020). Another is to determine if it is plausible to believe that the relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness would be stronger if the organization promotes an ethical and socially responsible work climate. Both issues will be explored in this paper while incorporating the Wheelan (2021) and Jennings and Stahl-wert (2016) texts to gain a cohesive understanding of why the serving leader is significant for advancing God's purposes for team leadership and to determine primary considerations that must be made in creating and sustaining workplace teams.

Servant Leadership and Teams in the Workplace

Servant leadership has notable and unique characteristics that can make this leadership style exceptional and superior (Walumbwka, Hartnell & Oke, 2010; as cited in Erdurmazli, 2019). Servant leadership has distinct features that focus on the follower's well-being, personal growth, and enhancement. This can be seen in the Wheelan (2021) and Jennings and Stahl-wert (2016) texts and suggest that this altruistic and follower-centered nature of servant leadership behaviors might make significant contributions to the motivation and commitment of team

members who sacrifice their substantial personal resources for the well-being of others without any expectance in return, just as their leaders do (Erdurmazli, 2019). Combined with other spiritual and transformational leadership concepts, a trifecta development allows organizations to build highly effective teams that can transform, transcend company culture, and create authentic and highly relatable leaders.

Leadership plays a significant role in the ministry of the Lord. Very few are born leaders. Some become leaders because of their birth origin or family exposure, as in the case of Solomon. In others, leadership is not inherited but learned. Merida (2015) posits that Elijah was one of the most outstanding servant leaders in the eyes of God in the Old Testament days. He extolled faith and was courageous to face false prophets. But Elijah was also fearful. He was presumptuous of being alone in the battle God had placed him in. Elijah knew well that he would need someone to carry on the tasks he received from the Lord when he passed away. Merida (2015) points out that as Elijah's early ministry draws to a close, a scene ensues where Elijah will go to town and try and shake Elisha (2 Kings 1-6). In short, he was faced with succession. This was the case with Solomon, but it did not turn out as Elijah passed the mantle to Elisha. This is called upon as the passing of outstanding leadership and the basis of transformational leadership in the business world. Erdurmazli (2019) argues that leadership behaviors which put the needs, desires, goals, and plans as the central point of the endeavor will be more likely to attract new people successfully, and in turn, develop effective teams and leaders that not only influence but nurture these teams as part of the culture of the organization.

When an organization can use biblical history to create change in their company, it can facilitate the characteristics of helping behaviors and the significance of people's motives and building teams. Servant leadership can be used as a very appropriate leadership model to attract,

retain, and recruit individuals for the organization. Greenleaf (1970; 1977; as cited in Erdurmazli, 2019) stated that "the servant is the servant first" is the foundation of his leadership philosophy. That model of serving followers first is the priority, and the rest will follow. This serve-first modality allows for the supremacy of getting things accomplished; rather than trying to persuade their followers (Van Dierendonck 2011; as cited in Erdurmazli, 2019).

Furthermore, Brown, Trevino, and Harrison (2005; as cited in Erdurmazli, 2019) explored how the triad of transformational, spiritual, and servant leadership overlap with the characteristics of serving first in the organization. Their results found that core behaviors coincide with the elements of servant leadership, precisely empowering, humility, and stewardship (Erdurmazli, 2019). Along with authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and providing direction, servant leadership aligns with the spiritual leadership theory.

Moreover, when a servant leader is developing teams in an organization, often spiritual leadership can come into play. This theory focuses on the meaning at work and the importance of the values in an organizational setting (Pawar, 2008; as cited in Erdurmazli, 2019). When thinking about positive organizational change and the methodology used to facilitate meaningful, lasting, and effective teams Kotter (2012) argues that successful transformation is based on instilling a vision that shows support from all of those involved in the team, from the (servant) and the followers. From a biblical perspective, this servant-first philosophy can be seen in scripture. For example, Jeremiah 29:11 extols, "for I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (*New International Version*, 1978, Jeremiah 29:11). This passage tells us that Christians can comfort knowing that God promises to be there for us. This is a crucial parable when an organization can use servant and spiritual leadership to develop their teams in the workplace.

Further, Jones (2019) proposes the strategies and principles that the servant leader can use in the workplace that allows managers to love what is good, not be selfish. This message can be found in scripture in Titus 1:7 (NIV) as it describes Titus, an epistle of Paul who directs him to become a leader of a church. In short, these servant leadership principles can be applied to empowering teams, especially Christians, because we aim to align ourselves with sounding doctrine and zealous of good works (*New International Version*, 1978, Titus 2:6-15).

Creating and Sustaining Workplace Teams

Wheelan (2021) suggests that team development matters, and it is no longer surprising to people that work teams functioning at the higher stages of group development finish projects faster, produce products of higher quality and generate more revenue than groups operating at the lower stages of group development (p. 33). There are ten keys to productivity for creating and sustaining highly effective teams: goals; roles; interdependence; leadership; communication and feedback; discussion, decision-making, and planning; implementation and evaluation; norms and individual difference; structure; and cooperation and conflict management (Wheelan, 2021, p. 33). The scholarly and biblical literature outlines several ways to reach these milestones.

One of the most compelling ways to create and sustain teams is using experiential learning. This author was recently certified to offer this type of facilitation to small business clients that need team building, conflict resolution, and communication. Using games and other experiences, groups can come together to meet the needs of all the critical areas that Wheelan (2021) suggests. Potnuru et al. (2019) tell the use of experiences to create a learning culture in an organization so that employees can share, acquire, and create knowledge and skills, which can modify the behavior of the teams. This type of organizational culture leads to a set of norms and values in the team to assist the company in creating an environment so that individual learning,

teamwork, collaboration, creativity, collective meaning, and value can exist (Torres-Coronas and Arias-Olivia 2008; as cited in Potnuru et al., 2019). This methodology results in employees with enhanced competencies vital to the stakeholder group in any business process endeavoring for improved organizational effectiveness (Potnuru et al., 2019). Hence, managers who strive for effective teams should put employees first, ala servant leadership.

Building workplace social capital is a crucial element to creating and sustaining workplace teams. Social capital refers to an organization built on trust, norms, and networks that can benefit society, including effective communication and positive leadership (Rankin, 2002; as cited in Materne et al., 2017). Building this network amongst organizational teams can benefit staff and management. Organizations that foster knowledge sharing and team learning are inclusive, staff collaborative, problem-solving, empowering change, and are open to suggestion and innovation (Ortega et al., 2012; as cited in Materne et al., 2017).

Harmon et al. (2018) suggest, as social capital is essential in creating and sustaining effective teams, several vital variables need to come into play when looking toward the longevity of a cohesive organization. In their study, Harmon et al. (2018) found that communication is a critical component. It allows input from the stakeholders, increases staff awareness, and helps facilitate manager/staff discussions about respect in the workplace. Communication should be woven through the day-to-day plan of an organization. Often teams fail when there is a communication breakdown. When crucial conversations are not allowed to commence, collaborative learning experiences play a pivotal role in achieving short- and long-term term and professional goals. Along with commutation, highly effective teams build a culture of trust through a commitment to build a community amongst the stakeholders. There are myriad ways

to construct this workplace community and can include social and service opportunities, weekly wellness walks, family weekend events, and celebration of milestones, to name a few.

One of the critical variables in creating effective teams is decision-making. When an organization has valued and committed partners that implement shared governance, it nurtures that community built on trust. This decision-making process can build on the idea that a process can improve over ongoing challenges and address needs as they arise (Harmon et al., 2018). In addition, this open line of communication can allow decisions to be made, provide feedback, offer recommendations for solutions, and follow up in individual and group meetings.

Recruitment provides an effective match between the mission of the organization and the objectives of the project for which a team is needed (Harmon et al., 2018). Meeting the organizational needs and matching the skills and competencies of the staff and management allows for opportunities to develop to promote within a team, mentoring, meaningful recognition, and value what each team member brings to the team's work. Along with recruitment, there should be opportunities for staff and managers to embrace the imperative of a healthy working environment, to authentically "live it' and engage others in the team's achievements (Harmon et al., 2018). Lastly, self-care should be an essential pillar in recognizing the needs of a group. Brown (2014; as cited in Harmon et al., 2018) said, "Self-care is not selfish. You cannot serve from an empty vessel." Self-care is the foundation for caring, and this nurturing environment allows a team to persevere, maintain the integrity and allow for growth. The goal throughout this process is to empower team members to become valued and committed partners committed to making policy and leading and evaluating organizational initiatives (Morton, 2015; as cited in Harmon et al., 2018).

Integrating Faith and Servant Leadership into the Workplace

Returning to the story of Elijah and Elisha, 1 Kings 19:19-21 reveals some critical elements based on servant leadership and team building that can be applied to the workplace. Studying the text closely will reveal that Elijah chose Elisha and signaled that he passed the mantle. By verse 20, Elisha had left his work and followed Elijah and later served him. This is an essential parable to all of those who will be chosen to serve. As a servant of the Lord, to have Elisha's attitude, spirit, and action in today's organization is a great asset. This is easily seen in the Jennings and Stahl-wert (2016) text, where the son is called to take over for the father in his work and steps up at a moment's notice. By the time Mike got to work, the efforts of a servant leader were evident, and he was reminded just how vital his work is. The Jennings and Stahl-wert (2016) text, in a nutshell, is Mike's assignment. It is to learn what serving leaders do and how their approach works, using the upside-down pyramid structure, and be there for his father when he dies. This can be seen throughout the Bible and can be used as a model in incorporating faith into the workplace (Jennings & Stahl-wert, 2016).

A goal of this author is to offer leadership and coaching experiences to his clients that he works with in the outdoors. Up to this point in his career, he has neglected the prospect of including a spiritual component in his work. Much like Mike in the Stahl-wert (2016) text, he learned many leadership lessons from his father. But it was in the opposite direction of the servant leadership model and was brought in as an authoritarian leadership household that his father used as a military officer. It took a lifetime of business management and entering college for a second time at 44-years-old before this author learned the importance of serving others first instead of a personal quest to become the best leader he thought he could be, which was an example his hard-nosed father taught him when he was growing up. It is funny how things work out. He needed to upend the pyramid, much like Mike did, almost exactly as it is outlined in the

text when they visit the Navy officer and "blaze the trail" (Stahl-wert, 2016, p. 88). In his attempt to understand a Christian worldview, personal growth has led to opportunities to see many of the ten principles that Wheelan (2021) outlines as he matured as a leader, albeit much later in life. Little did he know that he would be called to develop his teams in a way that provided a model to follow on future outdoor expeditions and he would use in his day-to-day business activities.

For one to become a better leader, one needs to become a better coach or vice versa. If you look at sports as a parable, you will see some of the greatest coaches were also great leaders. In football, Vince Lombadi, Chuck Knolls, Bill Belicheck. In hockey, there is Herb Brooks, and in baseball, Connie Mack and Bobby Cox. Spiritual leadership coaches require a particular skill set, and much of those skills and traits revolve around servant leadership. As a model, spiritual leadership incorporates faith into their teams, but as Fry (2003; as cited in Babyak, 2018) notes that an understanding of religion is essential for spiritual leadership because religion involves spirituality, but spirituality does not need to involve religion, thereby making it possible for leaders to exhibit spiritual leadership without a religious foundation (Babyak, 2018). But is that truly the case? That is something that this author is grappling with as he continues to learn in this doctorate program. Incorporating prayer, scripture, and coaching, servant leaders can often offer clarity and focus, convey truth, all while seeking God's plan.

It is easy to see how this model could be used on an expedition in the Alaska backcountry where teams are forced into experiences where their limits are pushed to the extreme, and it may be necessary to include opportunities to reflect and debrief in a manner that is much different than a corporate boardroom. Spiritual coaching can provide those opportunities. The Seven

Realities Henry Blackaby deeply informs one unique approach to coaching taught in his book,

Experiencing God (2006). In his book, he outlined:

1. God is always at work around you.

2. God pursues a continuing love relationship with you, and that is real and personal.

3. God invited you to become involved with Him and His work.

4. God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible.

5. God's invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.

6. You must make significant adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing.

7. You come to know God by experience as you obey Him, and He accomplishes His purpose through you.

This is powerful stuff. Galatians 5:25 says, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (*New International Version*, 1978, Gal. 5:25). Leaders can genuinely lead in an authentic and transformative way; they can build, nurture, and sustain effective teams outlined throughout this paper. Having a coach provide spiritual direction to his followers to help them move forward in faith can help teams as they seek to find answers for themselves.

Conclusion

Jones (2019) proposes the strategies and principles that the servant leader can use to allow managers to love what is good, not be selfish. This message can be found in scripture in Titus 1:7 (NIV) as it describes Titus, an epistle of Paul who directs him to become a leader of a church. In short, these servant leadership principles can be applied to empowering teams, especially Christians, because we aim to align ourselves with sounding doctrine and with being zealous of good works. As leaders look for ways to build, sustain and nurture highly effective

teams, there are many ways to get the job done, but when these leaders serve first, the other team

members will see value in the relationship. Gone are the days of organizational behavior that rely

on arcane leadership models of top-down, hierarchal approaches that do not work well in most

companies. Today's teams are built on the mantra, one for all and all for one. Organizations that

foster knowledge sharing and team learning are inclusive, staff collaborative, problem-solving,

empowering change, and are open to suggestion and innovation (Ortega et al., 2012; as cited in

Materne et al., 2017). By following this model, teams can accomplish anything, and taking a line

from a top-rated show on Disney, "this is the way."

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