Servant or Leader? Who will stand up please?

Iyer Ramajanaki Doraiswamy
Assistant Professor
Department Of Management Studies
Shah and Anchor Kutchhi Engineering College
India

Abstract

Leadership is a much sought after topic among researchers. The financial crisis and recession have further highlighted the aspect of leadership. . Recessional periods are characterized by increased focus on cost cutting and achieving profits at any cost thereby putting the long term success of the organization at stake. Decision making is always influenced by financial constraints, culture of fear of job- loss and development of 'yes' men. Leaders with a clear vision and enthusiasm can ensure that the organization and employees survive the recession period with motivation, commitment and engagement. There seems to be increasing prominence of shared and dispersed leadership as relationships and processes have started playing a central role in organizations.. Servant leadership based on ethical principles. It believes in serving followers and giving their needs top most priority over and above one's own needs. The approach believes in willingness to 'give power away' and 'let go'.

Key Words: Leadership, Servant leadership, Crisis, Sustainable

1. Introduction

Leadership has never come more into focus than in the current periods of financial crises and recession.When in tough times the over whelming purpose of business is focussed on the pursuit of shareholder value and to generate maximum returns,the main aim of the business model to operate with sustainability and integrity ,was lost in the myopic view of getting profits at any cost. The topic of leadership is the one that has been researched on intensely but the one with least consensus regarding the nature and style. Leadership is a topic that is central to various corporate failures, governance issues and regulatory breakdowns.The flipside is everybody recognises that leadership is inevitable for restoration of good ethical business.Crises periods especially recessionary periods are characterised by employee cuts,harder work and a well-hit morale and enhanced fear among the employees.If in the current environment organizations have to succeed the employees have to be fully engaged emotionally,physically and even spiritually. There is a need of a leader who can empower, acknowledge and motivate employees. If we trace back the history of leadership,it will be easy for us to note that there is substantial disagreement on the very subject of leadership.research has helped to a certain extent in validating certain key aspects like value of individual leaders,leadership education,management practices and skills but there seems to be some lacuna in how leaders make a difference to their organizations.

2. Leadership and crisis

2.1 Leadership crisis

> "The easiest period in a crisis situation is actually the battle itself. The most difficult is the period of indecision -- whether to fight or run away. And the most dangerous period is the aftermath. It is then, with all his resources spent and his guard down that an individual must watch out for dulled reactions and faulty judgment."

> __Richard   Milhous   Nixon

The financial crisis of 2008 has yet again crippled the world of leadership. Trust which is so important for any leader has been totally stripped off its meaning and the very legitimacy of the leader is at stake. This skepticism and distrust in leaders is a worrisome event given the fact that during these situations of fiscal crisis, it is only the trust in the leader that makes or breaks an individual's confidence in investing his life savings. A survey taken by the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School shows that 80% of Americans feel that there is a leadership crisis in the USA and 79% felt that unless there was a radical change in leadership styles the nation's growth would decline.

If we look at institutions that have failed badly, Lehman, AIG, Bear Stearns, Countrywide Financial, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac etc,we can observe that their leaders have done great disservice to their clients, employees,stakeholders and the society at large. The failure of leaders can be owed to their inefficiency in sustaining success and serving their customers with a long term point of view and no due to financial instruments.. US President Barack Obama said after the war in Iraq, "I don't just want to get our troops out of Iraq. I want to change the mindset that got us there in the first place". It is important not to just get out of the leadership mess but to change the mindset of followers and other stakeholders so that the failure in leadership does not occur again. What is required in leaders now is authencity, sense of service, integrity and flexibility As and when recession shows signs of recovery, leaders need to adopt a strategy of commitment rather than commanding, in order to ensure that things do not fall back to square one again. Certain organizations like the military or government offices work in a traditional hierarchical way and usually run best when a commanding style is used. So when there are thousands of people and many products, it becomes important to ensure compliance and he process is very complicated and complex. Leaders who do not have millions of people or mails to mobilize and organize and who are in a more organic business environment should shift to a more commitment and mentoring style of leadership.

2.2 Leadership : A controversy

For almost two decades research scholars have been trying to unearth this secret of leadership (Smith et al.,2004).This concept is still eluding scholars.The basic tension in the definition of leadership is whether to focus on the individual or the interaction of the social context and the individual. If we look at it the traditional way, leadership can be understood as a social influence process wherein the leader can garner the support of followers to achieve a common goal.CEO of Genentech, Alan Keith opined that leadership is creating an environment for people to contribute. It is still not clear which of the opinions gives a better understanding of leadership.

2.3 Leadership journey

Leadership cannot be viewed as a single concrete piece of science with well conceived problems and well thought of solutions. When we consider this once concept of leadership a variety of factors come into our minds like individuals,skills,performance,relationships,morality,integrity,inter personal dynamics, power, politics many other aspects of individuals and groups. Over many years it has been seen that there are as many definitions of leadership as researchers involved in the study. The entire concept is surrounded and maybe sunk in ambiguity and lack of clarity. The basic question is how leaders make a difference to the organization—by their behaviour? By their traits? The journey of leadership theories began with the trait theory which sad that leaders were great men born with innate leadership traits and if one had to develop leaders it was just a process of screening the non leaders and measuring the qualities of natural leaders. The contingency theory followed soon after that emphasized on the leader's ability to lead based on various situational factors. Subsequent theories made amendments to any previous theories thus driving across strongly the point that no theory could fully and clearly define leadership. Burns (1978) suggested that leadership is a combination of morality and a collective participative approach. He also suggested that if we have to identify leaders we should look at their abilities to contribute towards social change. He put forth the transactional leadership style (the quid pro quo method with followers) and transformational leadership style(leader sets a compelling vision and helps followers achieve the goals by altering motives,values and providing resources)

3. *Servant Leadership*

This seems to be a subject capturing the leadership arena. Traditional, autocratic and hierarchical models of leadership have broken down and given way to a newer model of leadership which endeavours, to enhance the personal growth of followers as well as improve the quality of the organization by involving others in decision making process, community building, personal and caring behaviour which is deeply imbibed in ethical values. This new approach to leadership is termed as servant leadership.

Greenleaf coined this term in 1970.Although the term isn't new; it still hasn't gained publicity possibly because of the paradox in it. It might be difficult to imagine a leader who serve and a servant who leads. Greenleaf (1977) conceived this idea after reading Herman Hesse's Journey to the East. This story talks about a pilgrim group on a spiritual journey. Leo who was the servant of the group ,doing all the menial tasks keeps the spirit of the group up with his songs and talks. One day he disappears and the group is totally lost and disbands except one person who continues on his journey .

Later he finds out that Leo was the spiritual leader of the cult.(Sendjaya et al; 2008).This story brings out a powerful yet a simple style of leadership that begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, serve first, then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leadership is unique in that, the natural feeling to serve takes priority over occupying a formal leadership position. There is no craving on the part of the leader that he wants to lead, his priority is to serve and only serve.

Graham (1991) described servant leadership as the most moral form of charismatic leadership composing of the following elements, humility, relational power, autonomy, moral development of followers and emulation of the leader's orientation towards service. Spears (1996) argued that servant leadership is a unique theory, comprising of 10 attributes: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. However these were based mainly on Greenleaf's writings and not any empirical evidence.

Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) proposed a five factor model comprised of vision, influence, credibility, trust, and service. Interestingly, they also proposed a developmental understanding of servant leadership. The developmental theory proposed, however, related exclusively to servant leadership and wasn't dependant on or correlated with any established developmental model. Greenleaf never attempted to define servant leadership, instead he posed a few questions (1970) [...] do those served grow as persons, do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?

Servant leadership isn't about demeaning oneself or one's self image, instead it is the highest form of service by assuming the lowliest form, to buffer the hardships of others (Vine, 1985). A strong self image, moral conviction, and emotional stability are factors that drive leaders to make this choice (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).This style views a leader as a servant of his followers and the focus is on the personal development and well being of followers as a priority over everything else (Greenleaf, 1977, Spears 1998; Laub, 1999).There have been many themes pertinent to servant leadership, which have been categorized under six different dimensions of servant leadership behaviour (Sendjaya et al; 2008) : Voluntary Subordination, Authentic Self, Covenantal Relationship, Responsible Morality, Transcendental Spirituality and Transforming Influence.

4. Why Servant Leadership

The following section tries to discuss briefly the central ideas based on the key dimensions of servant leadership in brief and a possible rationale behind why this leadership style seems to be a plausible solution for the current crises and why it could be a sure strategy for sustainable growth.

Voluntary Subordination

Recession will always trigger a negative reaction in employees. When people get disheartened the immediate outcome is 'no engagement' at work. It is likely that in the current economic scenario unless workforce is engaged and motivated on emotional and spiritual terms, the business might collapse. Voluntary subordination talks about a servant leader's voluntary willingness to 'be' a servant and serve others' in need, out of his own free will, regardless of the nature of service, the person served or the mood of the servant leader. This dimension differentiates a servant leader from self-seeking leaders in that, the latter serve only when convenient or personally advantageous to them. Servant leadership is about inculcating the essence of being a servant. The crux of this style is about letting go. Servant leadership isn't a formal position but a way of gaining influence in a non-traditional manner derived from servant hood (Russell and Stone, 2002).Employees need to be heard, their fears need to be allayed and it seems that servant leadership will serve to satisfy these needs.

Authenticity

During recession,the attempt is prove one up-manship in order to protect one's turf in the workplace and this can cause several interpersonal problems .Servant leaders do not crave for the lime light and constant acknowledgement from others for their work. Since these leaders inherently love to serve, there is authenticity in their actions. They are very comfortable working behind the scenes. This authenticity is reflected as humility , integrity (Wong and Page 2003), accountability, security and vulnerability (Patterson, 2004).These leaders do not have any qualms accepting the strengths of others as they are very secure about themselves. This unassuming quality of a servant leader may possibly help solve the intense and sometimes unhealthy competition in an already affected economy.

Trust-based Relationship

The authentic nature of a servant leader enables him to accept people as they are without any expectations from them (Greenleaf 1977). This unconditional acceptance puts people at ease and helps them experiment, become creative and take risks without the fear of ridicule (Daft and Lengel, 2000).Unlike many other leadership styles which uses status symbols and position titles as a barrier to be maintained with followers, this style treats all with equality and as equal partners in the organization .This quality is very essential in a period of recession as employees get withdrawn and go into a shell, productivity goes down and there is charged environment of fear. Servant leadership is characterised by open communications, mutual trust, shared values and true concern for welfare of the other party. The resultant relationship is thus built on faith and is strong and can withstand disagreements or conflicts without reaching the breaking point.(Sendjaya et al ; 2008).

Responsible Morality

All leaders face ethical challenges. Servant leaders ensure that both, the means used and the ends achieved are morally legitimate and ethical. Recession demands that leaders make difficult decisions in order to cope with the dire economic situation. These decisions may contradict interests of stakeholders .these trying circumstances can pose a challenge by testing the leader's ethics and morals. Servant leadership seems to be the style that may be completely suitable for the scenario.

Spiritual orientation

When the relationship of the leader and the followers is one of mutual trust and laden with morals, there seems to be spirituality associated with it. In this world where there is a big level of disconnectedness, isolation and confusion, servant leadership comes as a welcome change. The leaders respond to an inner calling (Jaworski, 1997) which they believe enables them to make a difference in the lives of others through service (Fry, 2003).The self aware servant leader can always connect the external world with the internal self which seems to result in meaningful and intrinsically motivating(Palmer,1998)

Transforming influence

Greenleaf argued that servant leaders bring about multidimensional (emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual)transformations in people . This process initiates a iterative cycle wherein the personal transformation occurs repeatedly and collectively and the whole organization witnesses a positive environment. This transforming influence is manifested thorough envisioning (Farling et al, 1999), role modelling (De Pree, 1989), mentoring and empowering others (Patterson, 2004) and trust (Patterson, 2004; Joseph and Winston, 2005).Thus servant leadership could help bring about a change in the working environment wherein people are listened to, allowed to take risks without fear, have a support or mentor during times of crises and do not compete in an unhealthy manner with one another.

5. Conclusion

The world needs a paradigm shift in leadership. The spirit of the leader as a servant, may be just what is needed to implement a strengths-based framework wherein leaders with an innate motive to serve, could be role models with core values and they could inspire a diverse work group for long-term common good. The command-and-control approach has been long rejected and organizations have realised the importance of learning from the grass roots and leading with a shared vision and a spirit of collaboration.Is it not possible to have leaders who are not obsessed with positions or titles, to help us create a future? For servant leaders, leadership is just incidental to service, an informal act that can be performed by all. So in these times of turmoil, "Will the real servant…Oh I am sorry, the real leader please stand up?

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