

Building a Culture for ‘Servant Leadership’

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Abstract— *Servant Leadership is a buzzword these days. A lot is being said and written about it, but the very concept is struggling to find its relevance and its rightful place in today’s leadership realm. If we are seeking to help it find its rightful place and thereby striving for the betterment of society as a whole, here are some pointers.*

(i) ‘Servant Leadership’ - An effect, not a cause

We need to understand that ‘Servant Leadership’ is an effect, not a cause. Or to put it differently, it is just a unique manifestation of our inherent core values. If ‘Empathy’, ‘Humility’, ‘Integrity’, ‘People Orientation’, ‘Service’ etc are not a part of our personal value system, there is no way we can make a ‘Servant Leader’. If we cursorily try to behave like one, our pretense will eventually get exposed and we will lose our credibility as a leader. It is like taking a tablet to treat fever, rather than treating the underlying disease.

(ii) ‘Servant Leadership’ must become a culture, not just an individual leadership trait

‘Servant Leadership’ at an individual level, just at the top is hardly of any worth. Only when it is embedded as a culture throughout the organization, at all levels of operations; that the organization will see its benefits in a long run. And only such healthy organizations (be it a small family, a business house, a government, or a public office) will collectively make a healthy, sustainable society.

This paper discusses how leaders should go about taking themselves towards servant leadership, build an organization-wide culture for servant leadership, embed it, and sustain it.

Index Terms— *Empathy, Humility, Organizational Culture, Sustainable, Synergy*

‘SERVANT LEADERSHIP’ - AN EFFECT, NOT A CAUSE

R F Russell, in his paper [2], published in 2001, has brilliantly discussed the role of values in servant leadership. I am taking it forward from a cause-effect perspective. If we want an effect, something must cause it. If we see the effect - Servant Leadership, we must realize that its fundamental cause is the person’s individual value system. If one truly and genuinely believes in values like ‘Empathy’, ‘People Orientation’, ‘Humility’, ‘Service’ etc, ‘Servant Leadership’ finds manifestation in one’s leadership style. It essentially has to come from the within, it can never be externally imposed.

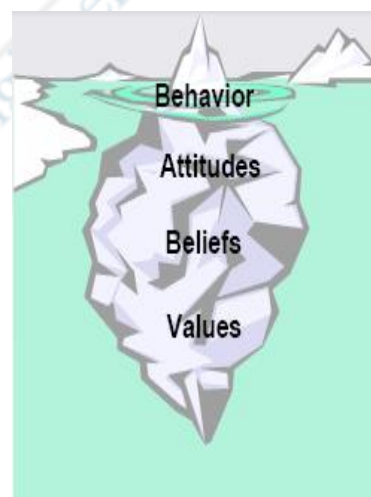
We come across many articles, papers, etc, enumerating the ‘7 Principles’ or ‘10 Principles’ of Servant Leadership. With due respect, such principles do help in heading in the right direction, but one needs to first explore his own value system. If it is devoid of the requisite values, one’s route to Servant Leadership will be much longer and much tougher. As stated earlier, the journey must start from the within, by consciously embedding the values first and then allowing Servant Leadership to manifest itself. One even has to be prepared for complete failure.

Of course, such fundamental core values like ‘Empathy’, ‘Humility’, ‘Service’ etc are not natural to many, and consciously inculcating them within may take a dedicated effort for months or even years. People usually don’t have the requisite patience. They often set off with a pretense and eventually get exposed. This is the reason we have very few who can make a leader and even fewer who can make a

servant leader.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AT A PERSONAL LEVEL

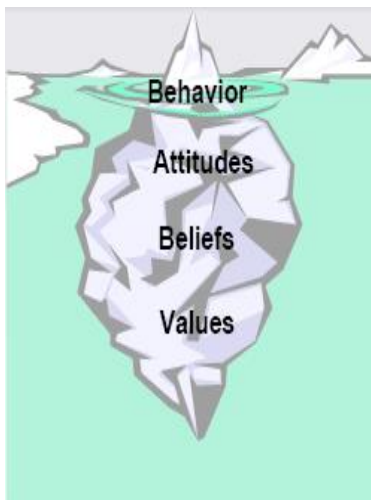
But as we discussed earlier, Servant Leadership is just a manifestation of one’s personal values and beliefs. It is an observable behavior. Illustration 1A shows an iceberg model that depicts how Servant Leadership manifests itself.



True SL manifested through actions
Respect, Synergistic Approach, Serve with humility, etc
Ethics, Empowerment, etc
Empathy, Humility, Integrity, People Orientation, Service etc

Illustration 1A : Manifestation of true Servant Leadership

Conversely, there are leaders who want to call themselves servant leaders, but their values and beliefs are quite contrary, as depicted in Illustration 1B. Such a pretense does not survive for too long.



The fake pretense of Servant Leadership
 Authoritarian conduct, Dictatorship, etc
 Succeed at any cost, Autocracy, etc
 Greed, Ego, Selfishness, etc

Illustration 1B : Manifestation of fake Servant Leadership

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AT ORGANIZATION LEVEL

As we discussed earlier, Servant Leadership at the individual level is not of much worth by itself. In an organization, Servant Leadership essentially flows top-down. Only if the top leader is a servant leader, can an organization hope to embed a culture of Servant Leadership. It is essential that a culture of Servant Leadership is embedded and sustained throughout the organization at all levels across functions. Only then can we expect any positive impact on society. Illustration 2A depicts the different layers of Organizational Culture.

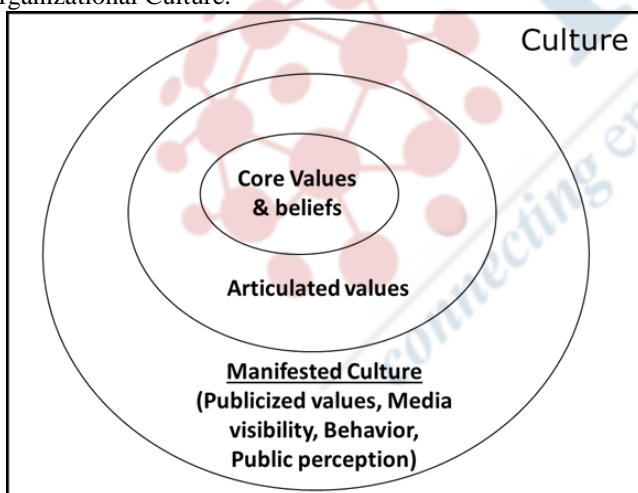


Illustration 2A : Organizational Culture

Core Values are called by that name simply because they form the core of Organizational Culture. There are two more radial layers surrounding the Core Values, and all this put together constitutes Organizational Culture; as depicted in the ILLUSTRATION 2A.

While the Core Values are non-negotiable, the leader does have some scope to modify/shape the subsequent radial

layers of the Organizational Culture; namely Articulated Values and Manifested Culture (Organizational Structure, Business Architecture, Business Processes, Publicized values, Media visibility, Behavior, Public Perception, Interaction with outer world etc.), as long as the Core Values are upheld.

As D Van Dierendonck has said in his paper [3] published in 2011:

“It is argued that leaders who combine their motivation to lead with a need to serve display servant leadership. Personal characteristics and culture are positioned alongside the motivational dimension. Servant leadership is demonstrated by empowering and developing people; by expressing humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship; and by providing direction.”

I have tried to put his views pictorially here, in the context of ‘Organizational Culture’.

One of the important roles of a leader is to carefully shape the two layers - Core Values and Articulated Values with personal involvement, because they put together establish Principles on which the organization’s business will be conducted, and Manifested Culture creates a public perception about the organization. A leader may have to strive hard initially, but eventually, as the core values, articulated values, and the manifested culture form a cohesive architecture, they create the right cultural ambience for effective service-oriented execution. This paves the way to sustained long-term success.

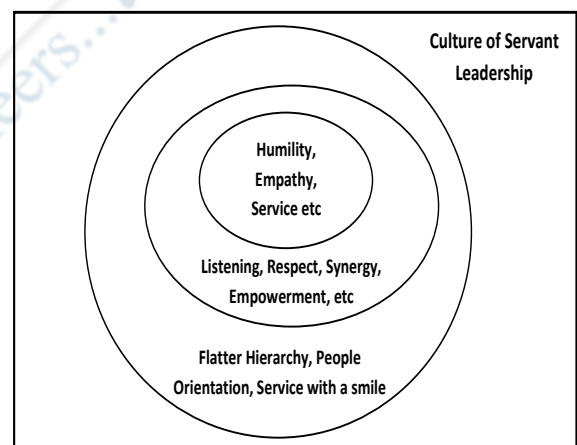


Illustration 2B : Culture of Servant Leadership

If a servant leader aspires to build a culture of Servant Leadership in the organization, the first step is to formally embed values like ‘Empathy’, ‘Humility’, ‘Integrity’, ‘People Orientation’, ‘Service’ etc as the organization’s core values. The articulated values need to be very carefully formed to make the next radial layer and then allow the manifestation of service orientation through the third radial layer. Pictorially, the organizational culture of Servant Leadership may look like Illustration 2B.

Some Articulated Values for Servant Leadership Culture may be as follows.

- Listen with Empathy
- Synergistic Approach
- Give respect to others
- Empower People
- Synergistic Approach
- Leadership by Example
- Equal Opportunity
- Meritocracy
- People Orientation
- Service with a smile

With such a culture, not just at the top but embedded in the leadership across all areas of operations and at all levels, people are empowered and organizations tend to become flatter. There are fewer levels of hierarchy, decisions become decentralized and we have an effective and desirable cultural ambience.

Building such a culture is a long process, and sustaining it is quite challenging. It essentially flows top-down. It begins personally with the leader and percolates down as the people observe the leader over a long period.

The biggest challenge for the leader while practicing ‘Servant Leadership’ is to deal with conflicting views, which the leader has to do all the time. To be accommodative and to keep smiling while dealing with these situations is an acid test. What may come to our rescue is the synergistic approach.

SYNERGISTIC APPROACH

When the whole is larger than the sum total of parts, we refer to it as a ‘Synergy’. For instance, if two listed companies amalgamate and the new company formed has a Market Capitalization greater than the sum of the Market Capitalization of the two original companies, we can call this amalgamation as a synergy.

The concept of synergy applies not only to company valuation but also to thought, goodwill, human relationships, emotional banks, and many other intangible entities. Synergy in human relationships is the endowment of creativity—the creation of something. Two respectful minds communicating and producing solutions are far better than what either proposed originally. Most negotiation is positional bargaining and results at best in a compromise. But when you get into synergistic communication, you leave your positions. You understand basic underlying needs and interests and find solutions to satisfy them both.

Synergy is not only about amounts, sums, or quantities either. It is also about perception. Many smaller fish species are known to indulge in ‘shoaling’ and ‘schooling’ behavior; either for social reasons or for gaining hydrodynamic efficiency or for protection from predators. At times they come together to make a ‘Baitball’, which is a spherical formation as large as 10-20 meters in diameter, to overwhelm and scare away predators, who can easily make them prey in

isolation.

Roger Fisher and William Ury (both Harvard professors), in their book ‘Getting to Yes’ [4], talk about a new approach to negotiation. While negotiating two people often take two opposing positions:

“I want that window open.”

“No, closed.”

“No, open.” ...

...with occasional compromise (half-open or open half the time).

With people taking such positions, the opportunity for synergy is lost.

“Why do you want it open?”

“Well, I like the fresh air, but why do you want it closed?”

“I don’t like the draft.”

“What can we do that would give the fresh air without the draft?”

Now, two creative people who have respect for each other and who understand each other’s needs might say, - “Let’s open the window in the next room.” “Let’s rearrange the furniture”. “Let’s open the top part of the window”. “Let’s turn on the air-conditioning.” - they seek new alternatives because they are not defending positions. If you get the spirit of synergy right, you start to build a very powerful bond, an emotional bank account, and people are willing to subordinate their immediate wants to long-term relationships.

THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE – NARENDRA TO NARENDRA

Saptarsi Ganguly, in his paper [5], published in 2022, has given a lot of insight into Indian thought on Servant Leadership. To quote from the paper:

“The Indian sub-continent has been the epicenter of numerous viewpoints and philosophies towards the actuality of veracity from the primeval times. There have been plentiful renowned philosophers and futurists that have come out of India and enlightened the entire world. Such a dynamic figure is Swami Vivekananda. Formerly named Narendranath Dutta. Swami Vivekananda was born in 1863 on the 4th of July in Kolkata.”

“If one revision the teachings of Swamiji he or she would treasure that the Vedantic description of leadership is quite diverse from its western complements. If one studies the Servant-Leadership theory one would find that its conferences on the well-being of the underlings and responsiveness of the leader towards his or her contemporaries. Here, the leader is a help to the subordinates

and of the organization and not the superior (Sarvapiyananda, 2014). This concept was recognized way earlier by Swami Vivekananda through his lessons on applied Vedanta than Robert Greenleaf who devised the theory in 1970. This phenomenon is quite analogous to Adam Smith being regarded as the ‘Father of modern economics’ while innumerable integral aspects of economics and statecraft had already been invented by Kautilya in around 326 BCE.”

Saptarsi Ganguly’s paper [5] also gives a list of a few leaders, who are regarded as true servant leaders.

- Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata (1839-1904)
- Ratan Tata (1937- till date)
- Nicola Tesla (1856-1943)
- Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945)
- Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1883-1948)

While I entirely agree with Ganguly, let me add to the list, the epitome of Servant Leadership - PM Narendra Modi of India. Here are some facts that bear testimony.

- Modi was sworn in as the 14th Prime Minister of India on May 26, 2014. Today as I speak, this is his 3266th day in office (almost 9 years), and the man has not taken a single day’s vacation.

- He calls himself ‘Pradhan Sewak’ (Prime Servant) and not ‘Pradhan Mantri’ (Prime Minister).

- He sleeps only 3-4 hours a day and is pursuing yogic practices to further reduce his sleep because he believes that sleeping is a waste of time and he must dedicate every moment of his life to the service of people.

- Whenever he travels, he prefers to utilize nights for traveling, so that he can utilize days for productive work.

- Modi got married at an early age but got separated soon because he decided to dedicate his life to the Nation.

- His father was a modest tea vendor. As a young boy, Modi used to help him with tea delivery. Modi’s mother lives in a small room of 8 Ft x 10 Ft size. She passed away recently at the age of 99, but whenever she fell sick, she used to go to the local government hospital in an autorickshaw (a hired 3-wheel scooter) on her own.

- Modi’s brothers lead a very modest life as common citizens of India.

- o His elder brother runs an old age home. He retired from the health department.

- o His brother Amrit would run a lathe machine when Modi was chief minister of Gujarat.

- o His family has never traveled in a plane.

- o Modi’s brother Prahlad runs a grocery shop.

- o His brother Pankaj lives in a government apartment.

- o His brother Bharat Modi works at a petrol pump (gas station) and earns Rs 6,000 (~ \$ 75) per month.

- o His brother Arvind earns Rs 6000-7000 (~ \$ 75 to 88) per month by selling trash.

- One of Modi’s brothers, while speaking at a function organized by an NGO said :

"There is a screen between me and Prime Minister Modi. I can see that screen, but to you it is invisible. I am the brother

of Narendra Modi, and not the prime minister. For Prime Minister Modi, I am only one of the 125 crore people of India who are his brothers and sisters."

- Modi does not own any personal assets – No house, no car, no bank balance. When he gave up his Chief Ministership of Gujarat and became the Prime Minister of India, he donated his entire saving from the salary he earned as the Chief Minister of Gujarat among security officers, peons, his cook, and his janitor who had worked with him for 12 years. This was his parting gift to them.

- “One Earth, One Family, One Future” is his motto. India giving free COVID vaccines to over 70 countries, India’s help to different countries for food security during the Russia-Ukraine war and Modi’s climate initiatives bear testimony to his spirit of service to humanity.

- Modi is striving to carefully embed Servant Leadership as a value among the entire Indian Bureaucracy and Public Offices.

Thus, the Indian perspective of Servant Leadership that began with Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda), the theorist; completes the circle on Narendra Modi, the ardent practitioner. Hence the title – **Narendra to Narendra.**

CONCLUSION

1. ‘Servant Leadership’ is just a unique manifestation of inherent core values. It is an effect, not a cause.

2. ‘Servant Leadership’ at the leader’s individual level is only the first step. When it is embedded as a culture throughout the organization, the organization truly begins to blossom.

3. Building and sustaining the ‘Synergistic Approach’ as a value is the key to building a culture of ‘Servant Leadership’ in an organization.

4. ‘Servant Leadership’ is relevant and applicable to all organizations, be it a small family, a business house, a government, or a public office.

5. When all such organizations have a culture of ‘Servant Leadership’, their interactions become smooth and far more effective; and that has a positive impact on society as a whole.

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