The Effectiveness of Servant Leadership in Schools
From a Christian Perspective

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Abstract

Servant leadership remains as one of the most effective models of leadership today. School principals who embody this leadership paradigm encourage and enable teachers, and demonstrate a desire to build school community. Teachers' effectiveness increases as they are honoured and served by their principal, thereby impacting students, colleagues, and parents positively. Servant leaders often put the needs of the organization ahead of personal needs and honour people, not programs and politics. Students ultimately benefit from this leadership approach as their teachers learn to serve them first as people, and then confidently lead them into their learning.

Principals who model servant leadership increase teacher effectiveness in their schools. Principals must understand the servant leadership role of modelling a servant heart (Cerit, 2009), enabling teachers to act (Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson, & Jinks, 2007), encouraging teachers' hearts (Grothaus, 2004), and communicating a larger vision (Taylor et al., 2007), in order to optimize the paradigm of servant leadership. Servant leadership increases teacher effectiveness by positively impacting their personal beliefs and values (Cerit, 2009; Spears, 2004; Taylor et al., 2007), interactions with colleagues (Crippen, 2010; Taylor et al., 2007) classroom leadership and pedagogy (Russell, 2012; Stewart, 2012), interactions with students (Herman & Marlowe, 2005; Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014), and desire and ability to build school community (Cerit, 2009; Crippen, 2012). The definition of servant leadership and the associated personal characteristics will be established, and false notions of it revealed, so that a comprehensible perspective can be maintained throughout this paper. Servant leadership is multi-dimensional, and requires deep understanding in order for more principals to acknowledge its potential to increase teacher effectiveness, change schools, and meet organizational needs (Taylor et al., 2007). I am currently in my fifth year as principal of an independent Manitoba school, which has kindergarten to grade eight classes, and upholds Christian values and perspectives. This article includes several of my experiences of serving and leading the staff members, students, and families at the school where I serve.

Defining Servant Leadership

Servant leadership starts with desire. Stewart (2012) and Crippen (2010) agreed with Robert Greenleaf's original notion in the 1970s about servant leadership, which highlighted the intrinsic feeling of leaders wanting to serve. That selfless desire to serve (Herman & Marlowe, 2005; Taylor et al., 2007) establishes servant leaders as being servants first (Crippen, 2005; Russell, 2012; Taylor et al., 2007), and leaders second. A leader's greatness is built upon the practice of serving other people (Spears, 2004) and although servant leaders are servants first, they can be great leaders because "leading and serving are two sides of the same coin" (Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014, p. 2). The essential skills, knowledge, and character traits that are consistently understood as leadership staples are still required to lead people (Buskey, 2014), the difference becomes apparent in the leader's value system based on the leader's actions and interactions with people. Servant leaders genuinely care about people and will sacrificially serve and focus on their followers' needs (Buskey, 2014; Cerit, 2009; Taylor et al., 2007) and leaders are often developed and discovered by those acts of service and stewardship (Crippen, 2005). Servant leaders stretch beyond meeting the needs of individuals in the

organization, but also put aside personal desires, in order to meet the needs of the organization (Taylor et al., 2007).

Cerit (2009) believed that the practice of servant leadership is embedded in the understanding that the self-interest of the leader comes second to the good of those being led. Servant leadership can be defined "as an attitude of leading others from a perspective of placing the organizational purpose, the needs of the organization, and the needs of people over the needs and desire of the leader" (Herman & Marlowe, 2005, p. 601), and as "an action-oriented state of mind that compels leaders to provide followers with what the followers need in order that the followers might be able to do what needs to be done" (Taylor et al., 2007, p. 405). Hansel (1987) defined a servant leader, with more of a balance between the "servant" and the "leader" portions, by emphasizing the leader's vision, skill and creativity and the servant's values, attitudes, and heart. Whichever way a servant leader is defined on paper, he or she consistently transforms people and organizations (Crippen, 2012; Spears, 2004; Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014) and creates effective, growing, healthy communities (Crippen, 2010) in schools today.

False Notions of Servant Leadership

Servant leadership has been criticized for various reasons, most of the accusations are isolated and do not prove to be accurate; therefore, they lead to false notions of the servant leadership paradigm. Cerit (2009) acknowledged that some authors have described servant leadership as sometimes being unrealistic, related to an idea of slavery, and containing passive and weak views of leading (Cerit, 2009). These descriptions are possible for someone who is only a servant, and not a leader. Otherwise such criticisms of servant leaders are misinformed ideas trapped in the traditional model of hierarchal leadership, wherein submissive subordinates serve their controlling leaders (Taylor et al., 2007) and the term "servant" becomes decidedly associated with slavery. Hansel (1987) countered that idea by pronouncing that "servant leaders are the freest of all leaders" (Hansel, 1987, p. 159), because there is less conflict between personal desires and organizational goals.

Servant leadership has also been directly aligned with transformational leadership; however, this is an inexact conclusion because organizational accomplishment is the key motivating factor for transformational leaders, whereas "servant leaders would be more focused on the emotional welfare of followers than transformational leaders" (Cerit, 2009, p. 603). Despite the criticisms regarding servant leadership, it is gaining more attention and growing as a widely acceptable leadership ideology and practice (Cerit, 2009). Spears (2004) confirmed that the criticisms listed above are indeed false notions, largely because the effectiveness of servant leadership is being recognized globally by companies that have decidedly accepted the value system of servant leadership as part of their philosophy.

Characteristics of Servant Leaders

If principals want to be excellent servant leaders and increase the effectiveness of teachers in their schools, then they must develop many strong character traits that are embodied and exemplified by successful servant leaders. The ten most popular characteristics were originally identified by Spears in 1998, based on Greenleaf's writings, and then confirmed over the last fifteen years by a multitude of authors and experts on leadership. The characteristics are listening, empathy, healing, persuasion, awareness, foresight, conceptualization, commitment to the growth of people, stewardship, and building community (Crippen, 2005; Crippen, 2010, Herman & Marlowe, 2005; Spears, 2004; Stewart, 2012). Additional characteristics that are recognized and developed in servant leaders are care and compassion (Cerit, 2009; Hansel, 1987; Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014), integrity (Grothaus, 2004; Taylor et al., 2007),

humility (Cerit, 2009; Crippen, 2010; Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014), and ethics (Grothaus, 2004; Stewart, 2012).

My father is a servant leader in his rural community and was an excellent role model for me as I grew up and was taught and disciplined according to what was believed to be right or wrong. I learned the importance of honesty, humility, listening, and other characteristics because I made poor choices at young ages that negatively affected my relationships, but I was corrected by caring adults based on the biblical teachings of Jesus Christ. My views and values changed, as I experienced the love and grace of Jesus, from hopeless selfishness, anger and arrogance to hope-filled and purposeful love for people and God. I also developed leadership skills and knowledge through opportunities in high school, church, sports, college, and university, whereby I was being prepared to serve and lead in my current role as principal.

The Role of Principals as Servant Leaders

The principal's role of leadership is vital for a school's progress. In order for a principal to operate as a servant leader and increase teacher effectiveness, he or she must not only personify the characteristics of servant leaders, but also model the way, enable teachers to act, encourage teachers' hearts, and communicate a larger vision to pursue. Servant leaders are "what they say and do" (Taylor et al., 2007, p. 416), and they transform their followers by modelling what they desire to see and hear from them. Therefore, teachers will increase in self-efficacy as principals employ consistent and vivid experiences of modelling behaviour that builds trust and reinforces the verbal commitment that a principal has expressed to serve teachers (Cerit, 2009). Part of a principal's role is to make teachers the best that they can be (Barna, 2009), and this partially occurs by enabling them with personal and professional development, the freedom to take risks, and opportunities to fully strive for the shared vision. Teachers become effective and caring leaders as they are enabled by principals, who serve, develop and empower them (Barna, 2009; Crippen, 2010). As principals set effective examples and teachers are provided with what they need to excel in their roles, both will be enabled to collaboratively meet the shared purposes in the school.

I believe the best method for me, as a servant leader, to model the way for teachers is by consistently demonstrating love, honour, and respect in the way that I interact with the teachers, students, parents, and any other person that enters the school. This does not imply that I flatter people or put on a fake smile or avoid people with whom I have experienced conflict. It does imply that people never lose their intrinsic value, whatever age, race, background, socio-economic status, or religion that they are associated with; people are important to me because I believe each one is created by a living and loving God who loves all people the same. My ability to lead is based on my ability to follow, therefore as I seek to follow Jesus Christ and model His values and heart with many different types of people, I trust that the teachers on staff will be inspired and empowered to follow my example as they interact with different people at school.

Principals who are committed to a larger vision will continually encourage teachers (Taylor et al., 2007) to persevere, be positive, retain core values, and strive to meet the short term goals that will eventually lead to developing the vision into reality (Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014; Taylor et al., 2007). Principals who believe that they can make a difference are able "to envision the future, creating images of what the organization can become. The leaders' excitement and enthusiasm enlists others to join the leader in his or her vision" (Taylor et al., 2007, p. 413), embrace personal sacrifice, and work hard to see it come to fruition. Servant leaders also recruit others by caring deeply for the people that they are leading, and principals need to perpetually invest into relationships with teachers to demonstrate care and respect, in order to maintain moral and respectful environments and encourage teachers' hearts (Cerit, 2009; Taylor et al., 2007). Leadership will always reflect personal character, values, desires, and relational strengths and weaknesses (Taylor et al., 2007), but then must translate into mobilizing people to share the struggles of ambition toward the larger vision.

I work at a Christian school for a reason. It is more than a job to me. I believe in a larger vision based on what Jesus described as the kingdom of God. I believe that the teachers and I are educating and equipping students to go into the world, as Jesus did, and effectively and powerfully serve and lead people in truth, humility, and purpose. These beliefs are rooted in my biblical worldview and affect the way that I make choices and the way that I encourage the teachers with whom I work. Three times a year, I hand write "thank you" cards (and give a small gift) to all my staff members, that include words of appreciation and encouragement so that they experience those feelings and thoughts that build confidence and confirm their energy laden investments. Many challenges come with educating different students with different learning needs, therefore I intentionally encourage teachers to persevere in their efforts and connect their daily investments to the larger vision of students impacting their community and world with biblical love, service, knowledge, reasoning, creativity, excellence, and hope.

The Effects on Teachers

Principals who emulate servant leadership directly impact the teachers whom they serve and lead. The foremost and sincerest effect on teachers is how their personal values and beliefs are influenced when they are served and led by their principals. This effect produces growth for the teachers and causes them to become wiser, freer, healthier, (Crippen, 2005; Grothaus, 2004; van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014) and highly likely servant hearted as well (Stewart, 2012). Through these personal connections and empowering experiences (Crippen, 2010; Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014), teachers' minds and perspectives are changed positively (Taylor et al., 2007), and result in an increase of job satisfaction (Cerit, 2009) and a meaningful shift in teachers' beliefs and values. Committed servant leaders change the people that they serve and lead, and as principals prioritize meeting the needs of teachers rather than fulfilling a checklist of administrative duties, they will see the change that they hope to see.

Teachers who are internally transformed by their principal's servant leadership will transfer the modelled relational behaviour into their daily interactions with colleagues. An increase of sincere love, a sense of responsibility to one another, and open and honest communication are proven to be some of the advantageous effects of servant leadership (Buskey, 2014; Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014; Tayor et al., 2007). A clear and consistent difference between organizations is "how people relate and how they actually function" (Crippen, 2005, p. 15), therefore the ability of teachers to work together with humility and integrity are necessary components to collaborative success (Cerit, 2009; Taylor et al., 2007); it begins with servant leadership. Such care and unity exhibited among teachers reflects the emerging of other servant (teacher) leaders due to the principal's servant leadership (Taylor et al., 2007), and the fruit of confidence, professional growth, and internal motivation.

Principals who model servant leadership will not only affect teachers' values, beliefs, and interpersonal interactions with colleagues, but also teachers' classroom leadership and pedagogy. Enhanced work performance and task achievement, and the improved cultivation of a nurturing classroom, are the outcome of teachers choosing to imitate servant leadership in their classrooms and instructional practices (Cerit, 2009; Taylor et al., 2007). Trust needs to be developed between the teacher and the students, and when the teacher strives to demonstrate other characteristics of servant leadership through his/her instruction then students feel cared for, valued, and perhaps willing to see the teacher more as a person (Herman & Marlowe, 2005; Stewart, 2012; Taylor, 2007). Effective teachers are relational and prioritize serving (Russell, 2012), and deeply influence their students to believe in themselves, have confidence in their abilities, and set and reach their goals (Barna, 2009). As principals serve and lead teachers, the teachers will incorporate many of the learned and adopted characteristics into their classroom practices, and therefore have a greater effect on their students' learning and lives.

Teachers whose pedagogy has been changed by their principal's servant leadership will naturally interact with students differently than they used to (Cerit, 2009), and create

environments where students have the freedom to be themselves because they know they are cared for (Herman & Marlowe, 2005). Professional relational boundaries must continue to be respected between the teacher and the students; however, as teachers model servant leadership they will build a community of togetherness and a sense of belonging where students are authentically valued (Stewart, 2012; Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014). As a team of classroom teachers each fulfills the role of being a servant leader, fostering understanding, empathy, respectful student dialogue, responsibility, hard work, and a desire to learn among students (Herman & Marlowe, 2005; Stewart, 2012), which will lead to a community focused and academically improved environment (Russell, 2012). Teachers who are affected by their principal's servant leadership will demonstrate more servant leader characteristics in their interactions with students, "thereby setting up the potential for raising the quality of life" (Spear, 2004, p. 10) within the classroom.

Everyone involved in the community of a school desires unity, healthy interactions and positive growth, therefore teachers who are impacted by servant leadership will strive to improve the school community. Building community has already been established as a characteristic of servant leaders (Russell, p. 2012; Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014); however, if the principal influences the teachers and they influence the students and the parents that they connect with, there is much more potential for relational reciprocity to nurture each other and build community (Crippen, 2012). A school community can be changed by servant leadership because it "truly offers hope and guidance for a new era in human development, and for the creation of better, more caring institutions" (Spears, 2004). As teachers grow as servant leaders they will influence the school population to grow in moral literacy, effectiveness, shared decision-making, and community (Crippen, 2010; Stewart, 2012; Taylor et al., 2007).

I enjoy working hard to be a part of developing teachers so that both the teachers and students can benefit in their learning, personal growth, and love for each other and God. If I make a mistake or disrespect a teacher or student, I apologize and strive to make it right. I believe that the teachers that I work with are influenced either positively or negatively through my interactions with them. As I endeavour to excel as a servant leader, I continue to learn and grow in my understanding and efforts to be a principal who is a servant first, but whom is also passionate about leading people toward a larger vision that will one day become reality through daily collaborative efforts.

Conclusion

It is clear that "servant-leadership provides the promise of an effective educational leadership and management model" (Crippen, 2005, p. 16), wherein principals serve and lead teachers and increase the effectiveness of the school. Principals must develop and utilize many servant leadership characteristics so that they fulfill their role of modelling a servant's heart, enabling teachers to act, encouraging teachers' hearts, and communicating a larger vision (Taylor et al., 2007). Principals who are excellent servant leaders increase teacher effectiveness, because teachers grow in their personal values, interactions with colleagues, classroom leadership and pedagogy, interactions with students, and desire and ability to build school community. When servant leadership is defined accurately and implemented correctly, teachers are inspired, mobilized, and empowered to maximize their effectiveness in the purposeful roles that they carry out. As servant leader principals lead by serving, they change those around them, transforming their organizations (Taylor et al., 2007) and increasing leadership effectiveness in the world of education.

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