

SERVANT LEADERSHIP THEORY AND ITS CROSS-CULTURAL APPLICABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Studies on servant leadership are critically examined in order to evaluate servant leadership's cross cultural applicability. The researchers examined studied on Servant Leadership in order to assess cross cultural applicability of the theory. The paper helps to understand servant leadership theory from divergent cultures.

Key words: servant leadership, cross cultural applicability

INTRODUCTION

Mclellen (2007) reflects that Robert K. Greenleaf coined the phrase Servant Leadership initiated a revolution in the way in which leadership is observed and practiced. He further explains that the ideology of servant leadership is ingrained in the theory that human beings have a natural importance ahead of their functional importance in organizations. Servant leadership focuses with the certainty of power in daily life, its authority, the ethical restraints upon it and the useful outcomes that can be attained through the right use of control. Greenleaf, 1998c:191 narrates Strong leadership can bring unity and clarity of principle and tentative leadership can bring chaos and confusion(Mclellen, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Irving and McIntosh (2010) measured servant leadership in the Latin American country of Peru. The study discusses servant leadership in a positive light, by demonstrating positive opinions by Peruvian Pastors towards servant leadership who specified that they considered themselves following servant leadership principles (p. 5). The authors further explain however that due to cultural obstacles, in practice, Servant leadership may be intellectually accepted but not modeled. Thus, the theory clearly is neither understood nor followed easily in Peruvian society (p.6). Irving and McIntosh (2010, p. 2) also note that Peru is a high power distance country and discuss the role of the Roman Catholic Church with its hierarchical structure and its effects against Servant leadership on the general public. Thus the society can be registered as negatively sensitive to Servant leadership theory and incapable to follow the core principles of servant leadership or easily adapt to its components (p 8 -10).

In their study **Shekari&Nikooparvar(2011)** uses questionnaires base case study of Iran industry to measure servant leadership in an organization and find out which factors related to leadership are important. The main focus of this paper is to examine practically the servanthood in Iranalloysteel. On questionnaires and expert opinion basis thirty three measurement items were developed by using factor analysis. The questionnaires are based on traits e.g.

decision making, controlling, generous dictatorship, participatory abilities in order to determine the impact of leadership. To observe critically factor analysis is applied on two extreme of leadership which are command and control and servant leadership. Finally they have developed model which is named six factor measurement in which outcome is this there are 6 factors (emotional dimension, commitment to community, egalitarianism, altruism, managerial skills and human skills) that better fits in model with respect to servant leadership. Servant-leadership incorporates the standards of empowerment, total quality, team building, and participatory management, and the service ethic into a leadership values.

Humpherys (2005) evaluated two historical persons, one, a North American Indian and the other an ancient Greek to gauge the similarities and differences of Servant leadership and Transformational Leadership models. The study states that the value of servant leadership and transformational leadership theories are dependent upon context and both are appropriate in the right setting. The study offers an interesting observation on servant leadership theory that advances support to seeing servant leadership sensitive to some cultural elements (p. 1428).

In their study **Pekerti&Sendjaya(2010)** have extended the GLOBE study on servant leadership that was conducted on 62 societies. The authors have replicated that model in the not-for-profit and for-profit organizations of Australia and Indonesia. Their results have shown that the managers in both countries have shown characteristics of servant leadership behavior. The important contribution of the authors are the findings that despite egalitarian culture of Australia and the paternalistic culture of Indonesia which are considered quite different from each other, the characteristics of self-sacrifice were given importance in both cultures.

Bardeh and Shaemi (2011) studied managers and employees of an Islamic University. The short study comprised of 35 questionnaires out of which 23 were returned. They noted that Islamic culture contains element of service (p. 131) and gives a comparison of Greenleaf's principles of Servant leadership and Islamic teaching (p. 132 – 134). The study supports servant leadership

and conclusion presents suggestions to help develop a servant leadership model at their university despite the patriarchal society (p. 139).

Han et al. (2010) studied Servant leadership in southern China to see if it exists in Chinese society. The study retrieved answers from 99 participants in 22 diverse public service organizations and is particularly helpful for assessment of Chinese philosophies' in-scripted on that society, the study provides support for understanding the servant leadership model as well as the importance of understanding value system' effect on servant leadership. The study concluded (p. 268 and 271) that servant leadership is integral to Chinese society because it is an element of their philosophical systems of beliefs.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDIES

Researchers appear to overstate their position in their enthusiasm for the theory which can bias studies, as Irving and McIntosh (2010) notices; leaders overstated their devotion to servant leadership principles compared to their actual practice. Major critique in Shekari&Nikooparvar (2011) is that servant leadership cannot prevail unless change occurs in organization attitude and behavior while this prevailing change is not examined in the study. Humpherys (2005) observation can be criticized since it is not based on direct observation. Pekerti&Sendjaya(2010) finding is doubtful due to the shortcoming that is visible in the methodology of the paper. They have depended on the previous researches to identify the cultural profiles of both countries, which they themselves admitted as insufficient, specially in Indonesia. We believe that the findings will remain inconclusive unless the cultural profiles are not properly measured, because the model on which this study is based has treated culture as an important variable. Bardeh and Shaemi (2011) do not have a large enough sample to draw statistical conclusions. Han et al. (2010) connected servant leadership with the philosophical systems in China but does not address the paternalistic, controlled climate of the communist government

which would be decidedly opposed to servant leadership principles and overshadow its philosophical system through base control of society.

SUMMARY OF THE STUDIES

Servant leadership is a theory that can be negatively sensitive to divergent cultures and does not always fit well with them. Irving and McIntosh (2010) concluded Latin American cultures have a high power distance which will not support Servant leadership principles. Humphreys (2005) noted that servant leadership is most appropriate in less dynamic environments as opposed to those that are rapidly changing. Conversely, other studies found a positive link between the culture of their subjects and servant leadership (Bardeh & Shaemi, 2011; Han et al 2010; Shekari & Nikooparvar 2011; Pekerti & Sendjaya, 2010).The table 1.1 below shows the summarization of the servant leadership study and its impact across cultures.

Table1.1: Servant leadership and its cultural applicability

Researchers	Culture	Impact of Servant leadership
Irving and McIntosh (2010)	Peruvian	Negative
Shekari&Nikooparvar(2011)	Iranian	Positive
Humpherys (2005)	American Indian & Greece	Negative
Pekerti&Sendjaya, 2010	Australia and Indonesia	Positive
Bardeh&Shaemi (2011)	Islamic	Positive
Han et al (2010)	Chinese	Positive

CONCLUSION

Servant leadership is a theory of significant interest. But the researchers need to approach servant leadership with the understanding that not all cultures will readily understand or accept its principles, yet servant leadership need to be dealt with a respect and understanding for each individual culture in which it is being studied. This paper attempts to summarize contemporary studies on Servant leadership in divergent cultural settings, in addition to this the next steps for future studies would be to test the relationship between servant leadership and culture empirically.

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