DEVELOPING EMPATHY AS A MEANS OF EDUCATING LEADERS TO BECOME SERVANTS

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ABSTRACT

Servant leadership is emerging as a major model for leadership practice and education. Nonetheless, little has been written about how the servant nature, or motivation to serve, of servant-leaders may be developed through sound educational practices. This article explores the research on empathy education as a means of promoting servant-leadership development.

INTRODUCTION

"It is easier to make a 'leader' than a 'servant,' to indulge hierarchies and control than to embrace service and collaboration" (Beazley & Beggs, 2002, p. 61).

Over the past few years, the concept of servant leadership has been increasing in popularity. Even in the academy where servant leadership has traditionally received criticism due to the limited research that had been done on the topic (Northouse, 2004), opinions appear to be changing. This is likely due to the increasing interest in and quantity of research on servant-leadership (McClellan, 2008) and the growing evidence that it is both different from other models (Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2003) and a major predictor of leadership outcomes (McClellan, 2008).

As a result of this growing interest in servant-leadership, a large number of academic and professional programs have emerged that focus on teaching and training people to practice servant-leadership. Many of these programs focus on teaching theory and promoting the development of the skills and practices associated with servant-leadership. In Greenleaf's terms, much of this work is focused on helping natural servants to develop as leaders. Unfortunately, very little has been done to explore how education and training efforts might help individuals to become servants. This article explores this question by examining the fundamental theoretical core of servant-leadership and its foundation in empathy. Based on this foundation, essential elements of a curriculum for servant oriented education are discussed.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND EMPATHY

In Greenleaf's seminal work on servant leadership, he declared "it [referring to servant leadership] begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice inspires one to lead." This statement differentiates servant leadership from all other leadership models because it places the emphasis the emotional realm of leadership. According to Greenleaf, one feels ones way in to servant-leadership. This is consistent with the emphasis placed on caring, compassion, and love (the heart of a servant) in the servant-leadership literature (Greenleaf, 2002; Spears & SanFacon, 2009). Nonetheless, this emphasis begs the question of how one might develop the heart of a servant. This emotion-based drive to serve others out of compassion that ultimately contributes to one's conscious choice to lead. The answer is likely empathy.

Numerous scholars in various fields of study have come to recognize that at the very center of the human capacity to care for others lays the both innate and learned skill of empathy (Slote, 2007). Empathy is a complex-multifaceted, and difficult to define concept. Indeed, Batson (2009) identified eight different approaches to defining empathy. These range from and include being aware of others internal states, mimicking or understanding those states, and actually feeling what others feel. Regardless of how it is defined specifically, however, there appears to be at least some agreement that empathy involves recognizing the emotions of others through conscious and subconscious neural processes that results in a connection with the other and an understanding of his or her needs.

As, Goleman, Boyatzis, and Mckee (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002) explained:

> The ability to empathize . . . stems from neurons in extended circuitry connected to, and in, the amygdala that read another person's face and voice for emotion and continually attune us to how someone else feels as we speak with them. This circuitry sends out a steady stream of bulletins. . . which the prefrontal zone and related areas use to fine tune what we say or do next. . . . This circuitry also attunes our own biology to the dominant range of feelings of the person we are with, so that our emotional states tend to converge (p. 48).

To a large extent the capacity to empathize is an innate component of our genetic inheritance based on the ability humans possess to recognize and respond to facial expressions (Ekman, 2007), our natural tendencies to mimic others "facial expressions, vocal expressions, posture, and instrumental behaviors" (Hatfield, Rapson, & Le, 2009, p. 26), the existence and impact of mirror neurons (Hatfield et al., 2009; van Baaren, Decety, Dijksterhuis, van der Leij, & van Leeuwen, 2009; Watson & Greenberg, 2009) and the role of pheromones in influencing mood states (Buck & Ginsburg, 1997).

The existences of these innate processes for facilitating empathic responses do not, however, infer that empathy is purely an innate capacity. As is the case with many genetic components of identity, experience and learning can shape how strongly empathy is expressed how well it is developed. Thus, numerous semi-conscious and conscious processes exist that influence empathic expression. Many of these involve imagination. Through projection, humans are able to think about how others may feel and, as a result, promote similar mood states in themselves (Watson & Greenberg, 2009). Intentional inquiry regarding the actual state of others complements this process and further amplifies empathic accuracy (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009; Goleman, 2011).

Through these processes of emotional attunement, we come to share emotions with, identify with, and ultimately care about others (Eisenberg, 2005; Gano-Overway et al., 2009), as long as we are not overwhelmed by the emotions that we experience during the process (Batson, 2009; Eisenberg, 2005; Laurenceau, 1998; Noddings, 2003). In other words, we develop the heart of a servant and may, as a result, choose to lead.

DEVELOPING EMPATHY AND THE DESIRE TO SERVE

If empathy lies at the root of the caring and compassion that motivates one to serve others, then the answer to the question of how to develop servant leaders is that one does so by promoting the development of empathy. It is worth noting, however, that unlike traditional educational practices that are designed to promote understanding or skill development, empathic education is focused on altering the emotional responses of others. This is not an easy task' nor one that is learned quickly.

Emotional learning requires deeper level learning, as well established patterns of behavior and neurologic processes must be revised (Goleman, 2011). As the old priest in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* explained to his young apprentice, "Love . . . does not come easily, one achieves it through relentless and protracted effort, because one must not love casually, just for an instant, but to the very end" (Dostoevsky, 1994, p. 401). This can be achieved through educational practices that both promote an understanding of the importance of empathy development in leadership and the use of educational practices designed to strengthen empathic interaction.

PROMOTING THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY EDUCATION

According to Gardner (2004), those wishing to advocate and educate for empathy development among leaders have seven tools at their disposal for changing people minds. These seven mechanisms include: rational persuasion (Reason), empirical support (Research), emotional resonance (Resonance), an abundance of ways of conveying the idea convincingly

(Representational Re-descriptions), offers of support and rewards (Resources and rewards), the occurrence of events in the environment that reinforce the change (Real world events), and addressing the person's specific concerns and limitations in relation to the desired change (Resistances).

As Gardner (2004) explained, "a mind change is most likely to come about when the first six factors operate in consort and the resistances are relatively weak" (p. 18). This is, fortunately, the case for the argument related to empathy development in leaders. Reason and research both suggests that a connection between leaders and followers is necessary for leadership to even occur (Bennis, 1999; Kelley, 1992; Wang, Law, Hackett, Duanxu, & Chen, 2005; Yun, Cox, & Sims Jr, 2006). Furthermore, truly effective leadership requires the development of a relationship based on mutual understanding of needs, values, and positive interaction that is based in interpersonal skills, which require empathic understanding (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Cameron, 2008; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Goleman et al., 2002; Northouse, 2004; Seligman, 2011; 2002).

Resonance is also clearly important as the very definition implies the creation of an emotional connection between leaders and followers. Re-descriptions and real world events further support the need for empathy as leaders who lack the ability to understand, connect, and respond to the needs of others are frequently in the news as a result of performance failures, ethical violations, and other challenges that caused them to lose their connection with their followers and, as a result, their leadership position (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Kellerman, 2004).

Rewards and support can be a little more problematic as many organizations are only beginning to provide rewards and support for relational approaches to leadership in addition to the more traditional support offered for short-term outcomes. As this occurs and awareness of the importance of empathic education increases, educators and trainers can promote empathic development through a focus on promoting attention and awareness, augmenting listening skills, emphasizing emotional intelligence, and insuring accountability for empathic responding.

PROMOTING ATTENTION AND AWARENESS

Given the innate capacity humans have to empathize with others, it is not always a lack of desire that interferes with empathy, but rather the tendency to overlook or become distracted from the emotional stimuli that surround one thereby limiting the potential for empathic responsiveness (Ekman, 2007). This is because virtually all neurological processes begin with the conscious or subconscious application of attention as a means of achieving awareness (Goleman, 2011; LeDoux, 1997; Lehrer, 2009; Rock, 2009). In the case of empathy, the subconscious processes of emotional contagion are partially dependent on attention and awareness. One must see, hear, smell, or otherwise sense emotionally salient stimuli for them to have an impact. If one is not listening, one cannot hear the emotion in another's tone of voice. If a leader is not looking at a

follower, he cannot respond to emotional facial expressions or engage mirror neurons. If attentiveness is only partial or the individual's self-orientation is too high emotional signals will be weak, confused with one's own emotions, or simply less accurate.

In relation to the conscious, imaginative processes of empathy, attentiveness and awareness are essential. Indeed, they require a significant direction of attention and effort, which Noddings (Noddings, 2002, 2003) refers to as engrossment or motivational displacement. Other scholars refer to this attitude of engagement as presence or being present (Buber & Kaufmann, 1970; Gerzon, 2006; Palmer, 2004; Roberts, 2007; Seligman, 2011; Senge, Sharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004). Quinn called it the fundamental state of leadership (Quinn, 2004). Greenleaf referred to it as opening wide the doors of perception or seeking (Greenleaf, 2002).

The core procedural components of this attitude of attentiveness involve developing a big picture perspective or broad view of the situation, followed by suspending judgment and increasing ones openness to external stimuli. As more information is brought in the individual retreats mentally to a state of reflection on the content and its relevance to the situation. This leads to insights, often flashes of intuitive insight that one acts upon in order to address the needs of the moment (Andreasen, 2005; Goleman, 2011; Nachmanovitch, 1990; Rock, 2006). Mindfulness training appears to be central to the capacity to develop and retain this type of receptive attitude (Boleyn-Fitzgerald, 2010; Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Ekman, 2007; Goleman, 2011; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003).

LISTENING ABILITY

To develop an attitude of attentiveness and to capitalize on it in order to to promote growth as a servant, one must develop the ability to listen empathically. Throughout Greenleaf's (1996, 2002, 2003) writings, listening is considered an essential characteristic and skill of servant leaders. Furthermore, Greenleaf (2002) argued that a sustained practice of listening represented the primary means of helping non-servants become servants. Listening begins where attention leaves off. Indeed, attention, along with attitude, is what primes one for listening well. As Greenleaf (1996) wrote,

Listening might be defined as an attitude toward other people and what they are attempting to express. It begins with attention, both the outward manifestation and the inward alertness. It includes constructive responses that help the other person express both thoughts and feelings. The good listener has trained his or her memory to retain what is expressed and to refrain from piecemeal value judgments. (p. 70).

Thus, listening begins with attention. Not only attention to the words one hears, but rather to the larger cacophony of inputs (both internal and external) from the environment. This should be

done with an attitude of seeking to capture relevant information necessary to understand and respond to what is occurring (Brownell, 2008; Hesselbein, 2006). Obviously, all of this information cannot be processed consciously and simultaneously. Consequently, listening becomes a process that begins before one communicates with another person and continues as one considers one's own thoughts and feelings, the context, history and background for the communication. As one communicates, one is open and receptive and intently aware of what is being said, as well as what is going on within oneself, within the context, and within the other. One also speaks in order to listen, typically through questioning or parroting information in order to better understand and to communicate understanding. Finally, listening continues beyond the actual communication setting as one reflects on what occurred with a continually open stance of striving to understand the situation and making relevant and appropriate decisions in relation thereto (Brownell, 2008; Glaser, 2004; Thompson, Leintz, Nevers, & Witkowski, 2004).

Listening, like speaking, requires that a leader clearly articulate the purpose for listening and engage in effective listening practices, including seeking feedback to ensure accuracy. Through analyzing the stages of effective coaching and the type of listening required at each stage, I have identified the following positive purposes for listening: to build a relationship by demonstrating caring, to encourage or reinforce, to understand, to assist in problem solving, and to support. In contrast, one can also listen to hurt, to discourage, or to argue with others. The literature generally supports these categories as relevant to listening and responding (Cameron, 2008; Seligman, 2011; Thompson et al., 2004). Obviously, the purpose for which an individual is listening impacts the information one attends to and considers and may impact the techniques used.

With regard to engaging in effective listening practices, it is worth distinguishing between listening techniques that are designed to make one look like one is listening as opposed to techniques that actually facilitate listening. Techniques that facilitate listening include taking notes, allowing time for responding, asking questions, requesting clarity, providing and seeking feedback, and attending (Estes, 2010; Gallo, 2007; Greenleaf, 1978). These contrast with appearance oriented behaviors like maintaining eye contact and sitting on the edge of one's seat. While the latter are indicators of listening attentively; if one is thinking about doing them, he or she is probably not listening. Regardless developing listening skills requires listening effectively over time to both the message and the emotion of oneself and the other via empathic listening (Covey, 1989). Any attempt to foster empathy will of necessity include training in effective empathic listening. Greenleaf (1996) specifically suggested,

Everyone who aspires to strength should consciously practice listening, regularly. Every week, set aside an hour to listen to somebody who might have something to say that will be of interest. It should be conscious practice in which all of the impulses to argue, inform, judge, and "straighten out" the other person are denied. Every response should be calculated to reflect interest, understanding, seeking for more knowledge. Practice listening for brief periods, too. Just thirty seconds of concentrated listening may make the difference between understanding and not understanding something important. (p. 70)

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

As a result of their emphasis on promoting the holistic growth of followers, servant leaders of necessity strive to promote what positive psychology refers to as flourishing or well-being. The key components of this model are positive emotionality, positive relationships, meaning, achievement, and engagement or flow (Seligman, 2011). In order to promote such positive development, those who are not servant leaders must be taught to manage their own emotions in order to influence others (Feldman & Mulle, 2007; Goleman, 1995, 2006, 2011; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Salovey, Mayer, Caruso, & Hee Yoo, 2009). Thus, servant leadership and emotional intelligence are closely related concepts (Winston & Hartsfield, 2004), Consequently, emotional intelligence represents an essential component of any developmental training of would be servant-leaders. This requires instruction and experiential development relative to both controlling negative emotions and engaging in positive emotional influence.

The ability to effectively manage emotion in these ways is based on core competencies related to emotional self-awareness, emotion regulation, awareness of others emotions, and emotional influence (Bar-On, 2006; Goleman, 1995; Goleman et al., 2002; Low & Nelson, 2006; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008) Given the close connection between these skills and empathy, the need for this kind of training, in relation to servant-leadership development, is highly intuitive.

Traditionally, much of the training and development within such programs has focused on fostering awareness of negative emotions and negative emotion management (Bar-On, Maree, & Elias, 2007; Feldman & Mulle, 2007; Goleman, 1995; Reynolds, 2004). However, for leaders to promote growth and development via positive organizational practices and cultures, it is essential that they also learn to generate positive emotion within themselves and those they lead (Cameron, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Hallowell, 1998; Seligman, 2011). While formal training represents an important component of successful such emotional intelligence education, coaching appears to be one of the better methods for development in this arena (Bharwaney, 2007; Boyatzis, 2007; Shankman & Allen, 2008; Wolfe., 2007). While there exists an abundance of literature on emotional intelligence training, relatively little of it focuses on the use of positive emotion in leadership (Bar-On et al., 2007; Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009; Goleman et al., 2002).

ACCOUNTABILITY IN RESPONDING

If leaders are to become effective in demonstrating empathy as a means of developing servant leadership, they must become accountable, personally and professionally, for demonstrating empathy. Virtually all intentional personal learning and leadership development are based on feedback and accountability (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Bloom, 1978; Brown & Duguid, 2001;

Goleman et al., 2002; Jensen, 1998; Kline & Saunders, 1998; Leamnson, 1999; Senge, 1990; Smilkstein, 2003; Zenger & Folkman, 2002).

Individuals should, therefore, identify specific attitudes, competencies, and behaviors in which they desire to improve and then they must account for and receive feedback regarding their improvement. Consequently, leaders who would become servant-leaders must practice the attitude of empathy and engage in the practical behaviors associated with empathy (listening, perspective taking, emotion regulation, etc.) while receiving feedback from followers and other observers if they wish to develop the heart of the servant.

At first, the behaviors may seem rehearsed or unnatural. This is to be expected in the early stages of practice; however, over time these will become more natural and emotional and behavioral congruency will improve. The best means of assuring feedback and accountability in the process of learning is to incorporate 360 degree evaluations, coaching, and action learning communities (Goleman et al., 2002; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Revans, 1977; Ting & Riddle, 2006; Zenger & Folkman, 2002; Zenger & Folkman, 2005). These approaches allow for the iterative learning that is essential to the development of emotional skill.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, empathy is a critical component of what it means to engage in servant leadership. Furthermore, it is a natural ability that can be developed and refined to amplify leadership influence and success. To this end, intentional efforts should be placed not only on developing the leadership skills of natural servants, but also on developing the empathic ability of both natural servants and those who may not tend towards this approach.

In order to do so, leadership development practitioners and educator should focus on promoting the importance of empathy in leadership and educate for increased awareness and attentiveness, effective listening, and emotional intelligence. In addition, they should emphasize the importance of accountability and feedback throughout the development process. Through intentional design and structuring of educational environments that include traditional instruction, mindfulness training, coaching, and action learning, empathy can be taught, developed, and can influence the overall abundance and effectiveness of servant leaders in society.

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