How Might Servant Leadership Work?

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This study examines the mechanics of servant leadership, particularly how it enhances organizational citizenship and how that drives organizational effectiveness. A case study of three successful Catholic parishes identified three direct leadership mechanisms—invitation, inspiration, and affection—that evoke and nurture the service of others. The case analysis also identified two organizational leadership mechanisms—culture building and structural initiatives—through which servant leaders fostered organizational citizenship. This study contributes to an understanding of organizational effectiveness by suggesting how leaders might foster the growth and development of others, build servant-oriented organizations, and improve overall organizational performance.

Servant leaders transcend individual self-interest, serving others by helping them grow both professionally and personally (Greenleaf, 1977; Lussier and Achua, 2007). Servant leaders encourage people to go above and beyond their own immediate interests by performing organizational citizenship behaviors. These are defined as altruistic, prosocial activities that have been shown to enhance organizational performance (Organ, Podsakoff, and MacKenzie, 2006). Although such a linkage makes sense, it is surprising that researchers know very little about how servant leader behaviors work and how they might interact with organizational citizenship behaviors.

In an empirical study on servant leadership, Ehrhart (2004) indicated that servant leader behaviors appeared to be antecedents of organizational citizenship behavior. With the growing interest in servant leadership, it would be helpful to understand the mechanics of how it works, especially the human interaction between servant leaders and their followers. The search for that interaction follows on the claim by Organ, Podsakoff, and MacKenzie (2006) that “future research on the mechanism through which servant leadership influences OCB [organizational citizenship behavior] is warranted” (p. 107).

In a more recent empirical study, Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008) found that servant leadership was a construct distinct from transformational leadership. Servant leader behaviors in
their model included showing concern for the interests of others, encouraging others in their career goals, delegating important work responsibilities, and emphasizing the importance of giving back to the community. It was discovered that the practice of servant leadership was associated with greater work performance in the workforce and higher commitment among workers for their organizations. Those led by servant leaders were more likely to develop similar habits of serving others.

Influence is at the heart of leadership (Northouse, 2007), a process of influencing a group of people in the direction of a vision or common goal. The influence of the leader may go beyond encouraging in-role follower behaviors. Leaders also have an impact on extra-role actions such as organizational citizenship (Organ, Podsakoff, and MacKenzie, 2006). A major review of the organizational citizenship behaviors literature noted that of four types of leader behaviors explained in path goal theory—supportive, directive, participative, and achievement oriented—the supportive behaviors were the strongest antecedents of organizational citizenship behavior (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, and Bachrach, 2000). It appears that leaders’ supportive actions enhance organizational citizenship because they “lubricate the social machinery of the organization” (Bateman and Organ, 1983, p. 588). This has been noted in studies of organizational citizenship behavior and transformational leadership, where leaders inspire this behavior by creating a sense of shared vision about the future of the organization (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Rich, 2001). Interactions between transformational leaders and their followers also invoke loyalty, trust, and commitment, all of which are conducive to organizational citizenship (Organ and others, 2006).

This article identifies if and how the words and actions of servant leaders become leadership mechanisms for increasing organizational citizenship behavior. It expands on an initial case study in which we found strong evidence of both servant leadership and organizational citizenship in three parishes that excelled in strategic and operational performance measures (Ebener, 2007). The original study was descriptive and deductive, where we sought evidence of servant leadership and organizational citizenship. This second study is explanatory and inductive, examining the mechanics of the leader and member behaviors that we identified in the first study. Although it was not possible to pinpoint leadership as the sole determining factor of success in those parishes, the association of servant leadership, organizational citizenship, and parish success was described in that first study.

This article presents a more vivid picture of how servant leadership works in a voluntary organization such as a church. Whereas the first study sought to describe the leadership of successful parishes, this study explores possible reasons that might explain how servant leadership worked and why it seemed to foster organizational citizenship.
behavior. After a brief review of the literature and methods used for the two studies, we present a model showing possible linkages between servant leadership behavior and organizational citizenship behavior.

Servant Leadership

Greenleaf (1977) opens his original essay on servant leadership by retelling a story from *Journey to the East* by Herman Hesse. The servant Leo is the character who inspires Greenleaf to coin the term *servant leadership*. As the journey begins, Leo is identified simply as a servant. As the story unfolds, however, he is seen as the true leader who brings a sense of purpose and direction to the journey. When he is gone for a while, the group finds itself in disarray. When he reappears, synergy reemerges in the group. The paradox of servant leadership is simply that leaders serve their followers instead of the other way around. Greenleaf suggests that servant leaders are servants first and leaders second. Instead of focusing on their own personal needs and interests, they are tuned in to the needs and interests of both their followers and their organizations.

Servant leadership is clearly normative. While it has been embraced as the corporate model of a growing number of corporations, the practice of servant leadership is widely divergent (Spears and Lawrence, 2002). It has been prescribed by many as the way to “lead like Jesus” (Blanchard, Hodges, Ross, and Willis, 2003). It also resonates with the leadership style and message of Lao-tzu, Moses, Confucius, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many other religious figures, both current and historic. Lao-tzu, credited with writing the *Tao Te Ching* about 500 B.C., gave this advice to leaders: “Do not command. Do not control. Do not force your own needs and insights into the foreground” (Heider, 1986, p. 33).

Western religions, particularly Christianity, emphasize the behaviors of the leader. Eastern religions, such as Confucianism and Taoism, place more emphasis on the inward journey of the leader, such as living the moral life, developing a collectivist set of ethical values, and building character (Daft, 1992). The Analects of Confucianism instructs leaders that “if you desire what is good, the people will at once be good” (Analects 12.19). The Bhagavad Gita of Hinduism suggests that “whatever the best man does, others do that also. The world follows the standard he sets for himself” (Bhagavad Gita 3.20–21). The Analects go even further in this reading. Confucius said, “If a ruler himself is upright, all will go well even though he does not give orders. But if he himself is not upright, even though he gives orders, they will not be obeyed” (Analects 13.6). The Jewish Midrash places a similar emphasis on leadership traits: “If you have not all the qualities which I have, you should not accept leadership” (Midrash, Pesikta Rabbati 111a).
Northouse (2007) suggests that both leadership behaviors and leadership traits are critical to understanding the dynamics of leadership. The study of leadership ethics, for example, falls into two broad categories: the conduct of the leader, which examines leader behaviors, and the character of the leader, which explores the virtues and disposition of the leader. The leader's conduct is seen through the outward behaviors, while character is manifested by virtuous living, personal training, and self-discipline. The leader is not born with character; rather, it is established through the routines and practices of the person being trained. The behavioral approach looks at the conduct of leaders and asks what effective leaders do. The traits approach considers the character of the leader and asks what personal qualities are associated with admired leaders. Together these two approaches explain “the actions of leaders and who they are as people” (Northouse, 2007, p. 343).

**Virtues and Values**

The Eastern focus on the leader's inward journey and living with character is consistent with a finding from the international research of Kouzes and Posner (2002). On all six continents where they conducted their research, results showed that acting with integrity is the most important trait for leadership. Leaders build integrity by practicing virtues and acting on shared values. Practicing virtuous behavior—which means acting with wisdom, courage, justice, humility, and other virtues—builds character in the leader. Practicing values—such as the core values and beliefs of the organization—builds community in the organization. Character is based on the integrity of the leader as a human being, whereas reputation is based on what other people think (Wooden and Jamison, 2005). In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle teaches that a person who practices virtuous behaviors will develop virtuous character. Keith (2008) suggests that servant leadership is inherently rewarding because it “is the healthiest and most meaningful for those who lead” (p. ix).

**Leader Behaviors**

Colloquial sayings reinforce the importance of behaviors, including setting a good example, being consistent between what is said and done, and living with integrity by integrating behaviors with values: “Actions speak louder than words.” “Practice what you preach.” “Walk the talk.” “Live by example.” “Act yourself into a new way of thinking.” “Do what you say.” “Practice the gospel at all times—if necessary, use words.” The message here is that behaviors are critically important and that the behaviors and the message need to resonate with each other.

The importance of behaviors in this society explains why the initial case study examined here focused on behavioral measures.
Behavioral measures of parish life included what a visitor to a high-performing parish would observe in terms of actual behaviors and what the leaders would be doing and what the parishioners would be doing. These became the research questions that drove this research: a case study looking at the behaviors of three high-performing parishes. Would the behaviors be consistent with the religious teachings and ethical values of that church, or would they revert to the command-and-control leader behaviors that are more common in today's world?

Command-and-Control Leadership

At the time that Jesus walked in Palestine, his leadership approach would have stood in contrast to the command-and-control methods of the Roman Empire. Command-and-control leaders focus on the acquisition and deployment of positional power for their own benefit. Servant leaders are more likely to rely on referent power than legitimate authority (French and Raven, 1959). They view power not as an ends for themselves but as a means to enhance the service that can be deployed for the benefit of their team, their organization, or the community. They are motivated not by a desire for status and control but by a call to servanthood, with a primary responsibility to care for others. As Greenleaf (1977) put it, “Not much that is really important can be accomplished through coercive power” (p. 73).

Although servant leadership has a strong normative component, it has been embraced as the corporate philosophy of Wal-Mart and a number of other large commercial organizations. It is intriguing to see this because servant leadership does not emphasize the power distance typical of such large hierarchies (Hofstede, 2001). Rather, servant leaders place themselves at the service of their followers, as Jesus advocated: “Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest” (Mark 10:43–44). Being a servant does not mean avoiding the use of power but channeling that power to achieve the common goals of the group.

Motivation for Leadership

Another factor that distinguishes servant leadership is the motivation of the leader. Rather than leading for personal gain, positional power, or glorified status, the servant leader is motivated by a desire to serve others. As Greenleaf (1977) points out, servant leadership “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first” (p. 13). This is similar to the message of the Buddhist Dhammapada, which states: “Neither for the sake of oneself nor for the sake of another, not desiring son, wealth, or kingdom, should a person seek his own success by unjust means. Then only is a man indeed virtuous, wise, and righteous” (Dhammapada 84).
The Jewish Midrash suggests that a leader should not “receive office in order to profit from it” (Midrash, Pesikta Rabbati 111a).

Greenleaf teaches that a servant leader begins by acting with integrity, creating supportive relationships, and helping others to grow (Beazley, Beggs, and Spears, 2003). In dealing with individuals and organizations, the servant leader carries a strong sense of accountability for those affected by their thoughts, words, and actions (Frick and Spears, 1996). How can the work of a servant leader be measured? Greenleaf offered this simple yet challenging metric: “Do those being served grow as persons; do they become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous while being served?” (as cited in Beazley, Beggs, and Spears, 2003, p. 41).

Although Greenleaf suggested that service was the single most distinguishing factor in servant leadership, he was not suggesting that servant leaders should ignore the rest of leadership theory and principles in order to practice servant leadership. Being an efficient time manager, for example, is important to servant leadership but certainly not unique to it. Greenleaf emphasized some of the same traits, behaviors, and factors that are indicative of other leadership theories. Most notable is foresight, which Greenleaf (1977) suggested was “the lead that the leader has” (p. 54).

In an attempt to summarize the teachings of Greenleaf, Larry Spears created the following list of ten characteristics of the servant leader: awareness, foresight, listening, empathy, building community, persuasion, conceptualization, healing, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of people (Frick and Spears, 1996). Ehrhart (2004) suggests that servant leaders develop quality relationships, build a sense of community, seek input before making decisions, reach consensus on major decisions, focus on the personal development of employees, demonstrate an egalitarian relationship with employees, find ways to help others, get involved in community service projects, and give back to the community.

**Initial Case Study**

For the initial case study of three high-performing parishes, the lists mentioned above were examined and a decision was made to focus on three categories of leader behaviors: recognizing, serving, and empowering. The intent was to create a manageable list of behaviors that captured central aspects of Greenleaf's philosophy.

Recognizing involves acknowledging, affirming, and calling forth the gifts, talents, and efforts of followers. Such affirmation and calling forth is critical to Ehrhart's notion (2004) of encouraging quality relationships with others and building a sense of community. It also intersects with Greenleaf's notion of community building, empathy, and commitment to the growth of people (Frick and Spears, 1996).

Serving behaviors are the core of Greenleaf's idea of leadership. He says that serving is a way that leaders accept the problems of others.
“as his or her own task” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 37). The following words of Jesus came in response to two followers lobbying for a leadership role among the disciples: “Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:27). Ehrhart (2004) built on this idea of service, explaining that servant leaders consider the needs and interests of others ahead of their own, lead with a sense of humility, create an egalitarian relationship with others, and model servant behaviors such as helping with housekeeping or setting up for meetings. They work side-by-side while serving with others in and around the organization.

Empowering behaviors are those that develop or enhance the capacity for others to act on behalf of themselves and the organization. To empower means to share power with others by getting the resources they need to act, building within them the capacity to get work done, and involving followers in decision making, particularly decisions that affect their own organizational roles and goals. Sharing power becomes even more critical in hierarchical organizations such as the Catholic church, where positional power can be concentrated in the hands of one or two persons.

A half-century of research shows the benefits of empowerment strategies, which lead to greater levels of commitment in the workforce, improved work quality, more innovative behaviors, and increased satisfaction among followers (Yukl and Becker, 2006). Such benefits are gained when leaders give followers significant control and provide access to management information. Empowerment is also a building block of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2007), with an emphasis on developing the capacity for followers to pursue a vision in service of the organization (Kouzes and Posner, 2002). Specific empowerment behaviors include delegating tasks and decision-making authority, seeking the advice and consultation of others before making major decisions, and making leadership development a priority so that leadership is shared among many (Ehrhart, 2004).

The next four behaviors examined in the initial case study looked at what the followers were doing. The expectation was that if the leaders were acting with recognizing, serving, and empowering behaviors, then followers would respond in kind through service that can be identified as organizational citizenship behaviors. Viewed here as prosocial behaviors, organizational citizenship behaviors are voluntary and altruistic actions that go above and beyond the call of duty. In their review of twenty years of research, Organ, Podsakoff, and MacKenzie (2006) identified more than forty measures of organizational citizenship behavior and distilled them into seven dimensions. This study narrowed their seven dimensions into four categories of organizational citizenship behavior: helping, initiating, participating, and self-developing.

Helping behaviors are viewed here as informal ways that members of a parish reach out to assist one another. This is distinct from participation, which involves engagement in the formal processes or
activities of an organization. Helping captures the essence of altruism, evident in the early studies on organizational citizenship (Organ, 1988), and is significantly associated with many measures of organizational performance, including efficiency, customer satisfaction, and quality (Organ, Podsakoff, and MacKenzie, 2006). Just as the concept of servant leadership has a spiritual heritage, so does helping. It is evident in the golden rule, a core teaching in virtually every major religion. In simple terms, this ancient wisdom states, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31).

Initiating behaviors are voluntary steps to accomplish projects, generate new ideas, or start activities in the interest of the organization. These behaviors are highly valued in and around organizations. For instance, it is common to see advertisements for employees who are “self-starters,” and initiative is typical of successful leaders as they take charge in new organizational roles (Gabarro, 1987). Initiative also plays an important role in building a healthy church organization. As Wilkes (2001) discovered in a study of excellent parishes, initiative allows the work to be spread among various members of a parish.

Participating means that parishioners are engaged in the formal activities of the organization. In the workplace, participation is a route to greater organizational effectiveness (Bowditch and Buono, 2005; Passamore, 1988; Trist and Bamforth, 1951). While sociotechnical researchers have emphasized the importance of participation in business organizations, in relatively recent times its value was also emphasized in the Catholic church, where Vatican II opened the door to greater lay involvement in parish life (Abbott, 1966).

Self-developing means that members of the parish take responsibility for and are active in their own growth and development, which enhances their ability to take initiative and participate fully. The willingness to grow, change, and innovate is also characteristic of members in excellent parishes (Wilkes, 2001). In employment situations, this is part of the “new deal” as employees are responsible to continue learning as their work lives take them through and across organizations (Hall, 2002). In volunteer settings, such development could help people serve more effectively as their knowledge, skills, and abilities grow. Self-development involves increasing familiarity with policies and processes, which contributes to the growth of individuals as potential leaders.

Methods

This study emerged from a question posed by Bishop William Franklin of the Catholic Diocese of Davenport, Iowa. Faced with the issue of closing, consolidating, and clustering parishes, the bishop asked, “How do you measure the life of a parish?” In response to the bishop’s question, a three-part model of parish life was developed, with strategic, operational, and behavioral measures.
Strategic measures were captured in a self-study in which each of the eighty-four parishes submitted a self-assessment covering forty-three questions about the accomplishment of the parish mission in several areas of ministry. Twenty operational measures included average financial contribution, the number of newly baptized individuals, weekly attendance, and growth in parish income. Seven behavioral measures were pursued in the search for the three servant leader behaviors and four organizational citizenship behaviors.

In order to select three high-performing parishes to explore the behavioral measures, twenty-four diocesan leaders were given the results of the self-study, the demographic measures, and the financial statements, and were asked to score the parishes. This led to an eventual rank ordering of all eighty-four parishes. Based on this evaluative ranking, the highest-scoring small, medium, and large parishes were selected as cases for the initial case study: a small rural parish of forty-three families; a medium-size suburban parish with about 680 families; and a large urban parish with about 1,700 families.

Phase One
The case study began with a focus on identifying and describing the servant leader behaviors and organizational citizenship behaviors in the parishes, reported more fully in Ebener (2007). In that study, the field data were triangulated by using multiple research methods, multiple sources of data, and multiple members of the research team (Yin, 2003). The study included direct observation in each parish, focus groups with parish leaders, one-on-one interviews with the pastor and one member of the parish staff, and archival record review, such as bulletins, newsletters, sacramental records, and financial data. The research team had three members: a diocesan staff member, a social worker, and the editor of the diocesan newspaper.

The researchers interviewed parish leaders, led focus groups of council members and lay leaders, and observed religious services and meetings. The focus groups and one-on-one interviews were taped, transcribed, coded, recoded, and checked for intercoder reliability, which was calculated at 84.5 percent. All three members of the research team completed a sixty-item observation guide that focused attention on formal and informal exchanges and other aspects of the organizations. The team also gathered and studied archival data, including brochures, bulletins, and information gathered through the parish life study, all of which were examined for evidence of specific leader and member behaviors. Detailed findings of this case study are reported in Ebener (2007).

Phase Two
This article focuses on the second stage of this study: an inductive search for patterns of behavior that could examine possible reasons
to explain how servant leadership works and why it enhances organizational citizenship. This phase included studying once again the 180 pages of transcripts, listening again to the recorded tapes of all focus groups, and examining the results of the interviews. Dozens of areas of the transcripts from each parish were identified for further exploration using a grounded theory approach. Specifically, we searched for sections within the transcripts that had been coded for both servant leader and organizational citizenship behaviors in close proximity to one another.

This helped identify the interactions between the leader and member behaviors. Interaction is defined here as “behavior between two or more persons in which the action of any one person influences and is influenced by the action of another person” (Lefton and Buzzotta, 2004, p. 51). In some cases, for instance, parishioners explained the impact of the leader’s behaviors on them or described the leader’s behavior as an antecedent to their own behavior. Based on an iterative process of examination and reexamination, we discerned what specific leadership mechanisms might best explain how and why the leader behaviors influenced the behaviors of the parishioners. Based on the data, we suggested, discussed, and debated alternative explanations. From this inductive process, five themes emerged. Three of them were types of direct interpersonal exchanges; the other two involved macrofeatures of the organization.

Results

Careful study of the interactions between leaders and members of these three parishes revealed three direct mechanisms: invitation, inspiration, and affection. Two other organizational mechanisms emerged from the data: cultural and structural. The mechanisms are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Linkages Between Servant Leadership and Organizational Citizenship
Direct Mechanisms

Invitation. Effective servant leaders invited the people to act on behalf of the parish. The invitation of a leader is a direct and intentional action to encourage helping, initiating, participating, or self-developing behaviors. All three pastors in this study indicated that when they see a particular need in the parish and know of someone with the gifts and talents to meet that need, they personally invite that person to participate or help in some other way. As one pastor stated, “We are not telling people what to do; we are inviting them to participate.” This statement indicates a direct cause and effect between inviting and participating. Parish council members interviewed for this study recalled being “tapped on the shoulder,” a phrase that was used several times to describe the personal invitation they received from their pastor or other parish leader. As one parish council member explained, laypeople step up to volunteer because “we were asked and we stepped forward.” The youth minister described her invitation to one person: “Bill, you are really good at woodworking, and the kids are coming over to polish the pews. Could you be there to help show them how it is done?”

A pastoral associate stated that when she is uncertain where to turn for help with a project, “I ask the parish council, ‘Who in the parish can do this?’”

Inspiration. Servant leaders also fostered organizational citizenship by inspiring people to devote their efforts to the organization. Inspiration is seen here as an intrinsic form of motivation. Members in all three parishes noted that humble service on the part of parish leaders was a source of inspiration for them. When the parish leaders humbly placed themselves at the service of others in the parish, the members in the parish were inspired to reciprocate with service to the congregation. An example was found in all three parishes, as leaders gave credit to others for ministries that were succeeding and took the blame for ministries that were struggling. Collins (2001, p. 34) calls this “the window and the mirror,” where leaders look out the window to give credit to others in times of success and look into the mirror and take the blame in times of failure. One parish council member described a pastoral associate this way: “She just gives it right back, just shines that light. She’s like a mirror that just puts the light right back on the parishioners.”

Leaders also inspired through examples that might be emulated by others within the whole organization. The leaders, intentionally or not, modeled behaviors for others to follow. One example was a pastor who encouraged parishioners to attend lay ministry trainings by offering to go with them. Another was a pastoral associate who offered to attend a conference with a parishioner who was being trained to lead faith-formation classes. Similarly, one pastor reported that when a commission is not performing well, the attendance by
laypeople at their meetings increases if he as pastor begins attending their meetings.

Several parishioners described their parish leaders as “just as involved as we are.” One parish council member suggested, “When you see that all of their time, more than they even have to give, they are spent doing things for us, and if they ask us to do one small thing, how could you say no to that?” Another member explained that when the pastoral associate asked them to give something, they would look around and see how much she was already giving to the parish. “You figure you have to give too, to help the community.” The parish leaders in this study were depicted by many as role models of service to the congregation. One parishioner described a situation where a large snowfall hit their town. She said that because the parish leaders are “always ready to roll up their sleeves and help do whatever needs to be done, all these people just showed up and helped clean the sidewalk.”

**Affection.** The personal care and concern that servant leaders demonstrate for others increased the likelihood of organizational citizenship. Affection is defined here as expressing care and support for members of the parish. One parish council explained that when their parish was facing a major decision, their pastor had organized a series of focus groups in the parish that helped the parishioners “feel listened to and cared for” by the parish leadership. A number of laypeople in this study explained that when their parish leaders listened carefully to the members of the congregation, ministered to their particular needs, or demonstrated in some other way that they cared for the parishioners, the members of the parish were more inclined to help or participate in parish activities. As one parish council member described her pastor, “He’s always visiting people and trying to get them involved. . . . It makes you want to help.”

**Organizational Mechanisms**
The three individual mechanisms explain only the direct factors that influence followers. It became evident from the data from these three parishes that the leaders also influenced the behaviors of followers even when they were not personally present or when they had no direct contact with the follower. The leaders also worked through two organizational mechanisms—cultural and structural—evoking organizational citizenship.

**Culture of Service.** The behaviors of the servant leaders set norms for organizational citizenship. Cultures of service established throughout the organizations had an impact on the beliefs, assumptions, values, and behaviors of the followers.

A culture of service was evident in the comment by a pastor who said that many times people volunteered to get something done
“before I was even able to recognize” that it needed to be done. A parishioner suggested that people were operating in an environment of encouragement and support, stating that he didn’t feel “your idea has to fit this one modality and if it doesn’t you have to get a new idea.” The culture of service was associated with the empowerment of the people. One pastor said he was able to sleep soundly without needing to “wake up in the middle of the night wondering how am I going to solve this problem.” The basis for this peaceful rest was expressed in this way: “I have a lot of help from a lot of good people.” Through a network of help and support, service became a norm in the parish.

Structures of Service. Parish leaders also created systems that enhanced the capacity for members of the congregation to act. By building community and establishing small group networks, the leaders structured their organizations in ways that foster organizational citizenship behavior. The primary structure involved creating or fostering identity groups that were small enough to invite participation, nurture helping behaviors, encourage initiative, and enable many people to develop their own knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Structural influences were not as apparent in the smallest parish, which acted as a family. The organization was small enough that people knew a lot about the other members. For instance, the achievements of children in the parish were often posted in the entryway of the church, sharing their successes with the whole parish family. Governance was achieved through a committee of the whole, without a system of committees and councils.

The two larger parishes in this study required a system of multiple parish commissions (working committees) that afforded opportunities to many volunteers to assume leadership roles within the parish. The pastor of the largest parish explained that the parish staff keep track of “which commission needs more participation” each year and they “make sure we ask people to get involved” in that commission. While it is helpful to have a system of commissions in place, members need ways to identify their niche within the commissions and to register with a commission where they can serve. For instance, the largest parish celebrates Stewardship Sunday, when parish leaders explain the work of the various commissions and encourage parishioners to sign up.

Discussion

This study contributes to our understanding of leader-member dynamics. Two categories of leadership influence are presented to help explain the relationship between servant leadership and organizational citizenship. The first category involves three more direct, personal interactions between leader and follower. The second involves
two organizational influences of leaders on organizational citizenship behavior. Together these five leadership mechanisms try to answer the question posed by Organ and others (2006) about how servant leadership works and why it can create a vibrant and serving organization by enhancing organizational citizenship.

Direct Leadership Mechanisms

**Invitation: The Voice.** Servant leaders continually invited people to acts of service. The inductive search of the transcripts revealed that leaders were repeatedly asking people to participate by “tapping on the shoulder” to encourage members to join them. The leaders were not shy about asking others to participate in the life of the parish. This was a consistent theme that resulted in several actions that could truly be considered organizational citizenship. This finding also amplifies the developmental role of servant leaders. Serving does not merely mean doing things for others, but directly encouraging and engaging others to lives of service as well.

As Greenleaf pointed out, servant leadership engages the followers to become fully human (Beazley, Beggs, and Spears, 2003). The organization will become more effective if the members become whole people. This happens when people are fully engaged in the mission of the organization. The servant leader enriches the life of the followers by recognizing their gifts and talents and inviting them into full participation in the organization.

**Inspiration: The Spirit.** Servant leaders inspired people to acts of organizational citizenship. At first glance, it might be hard to distinguish between inspiration and invitation. In both cases, the servant leader is influencing the followers to move in the direction of the common goal of the organization. Unlike coercive leadership, servant leadership invites and inspires the followers to freely choose. The key difference is that invitation is a direct request for action, while inspiration raises the aspiration level and fuels the internal motivation of the follower. Invitation provides a direct call, and inspiration provokes an internal one.

Servant leaders can inspire by modeling service. A role model provides a template for action. Just as many kinds of learning can be facilitated by social modeling (Bandura, 1986), it seems that pro-social behaviors can be as well. This is in line with the role of modeling in transformational leaders who show the way to effective action (Kouzes and Posner, 2002). So while the servant leader is concerned for the welfare of the followers, he or she also demonstrates a way in which they might conduct themselves.

**Affection: The Heart.** Servant leaders encouraged congregation members to acts of organizational citizenship by demonstrating that they cared for them. When leaders demonstrate high levels of
concern and genuine interest in the followers, the leader is also establishing trust and building a sense of commitment that can motivate others to spend extra effort on behalf of the leader and the organization. Research demonstrates that high-quality social exchange relationships between leader and follower invoke loyalty, trust, and support on the follower side (Organ, Podsakoff, and MacKenzie, 2006). A number of studies indicate that the quality of the “exchange relationship motivates employees to engage in organizational citizenship by increasing their sense of obligation, desire to reciprocate and trust, liking for and commitment to the leader” (Organ, Podsakoff, and MacKenzie, 2006, p. 105).

Organizational Mechanisms

Transformational leader behaviors, especially those that empower, encourage, and provide support, have also been associated with enhancing organizational citizenship. According to Organ, Podsakoff, and MacKenzie (2006), leaders enhance organizational citizenship when their behaviors are centered on supporting the followers. It appears that the servant leaders in the study also had a transformational effect on parish life. Their leadership transformed people and organizations by changing the culture and structure of their organization in order to enhance the participation of followers (Burns, 2003). Both of the organizational influences—culture and structure—suggest macrolevel ways that leaders can drive certain behaviors by members of the parish. These are all ways in which organizations can “canalize” the behaviors of members (Scott and Davis, 2006). The servant leader behaviors observed in this study were conducive to reinforcing, if not creating, a servant culture and servant structures that fostered organizational citizenship.

The Servant Culture. While culture is sometimes seen simply as “the way we do things around here” (Deal and Kennedy, 1982), at a deeper level it is seen as a set of basic assumptions, beliefs, and values about an organization. Culture determines a way of doing things to cope with problems of integration and differentiation, eventually establishing the norm that is taught to others as the right way to do things (Schein, 2002). In this study, the parish cultures were cultures of service because they enhanced the service of the people. This is akin to the way others have spoken of particular types of cultures. For instance, developing a culture that emphasizes worker safety is an important part of making an organization a safer place to work, and creating a culture focused on quality is an important element of building high-quality products on a sustained basis.

The Servant Structure. Parish structures that were influential in promoting organizational citizenship were found especially in the formation of commissions and councils that provided laypeople an
opportunity to take initiative and participate in governance, planning, and action on behalf of the parish. While culture might be shaped through public proclamation from a pulpit, structure is shaped by creating systems that share power and decision making in an organization. In this study, the parish structures were structures of service because they enhanced the service of the members. Many “interacts” take place, creating emergent structures, when servant leaders attend to certain people and issues, select actions, and act in predictable ways (Weick, 1979, 1995).

**Strategic Influence.** Servant leaders are involved in the emergent nature of both structure and culture, setting norms of interaction that solidify over time and creating systems that maximize opportunities for those interactions. Another area of organizational influence that might be expected but was not so evident in this study was strategic influence. Like culture and structure, strategy has a macrolevel influence on the behaviors of people. Strategic planning can involve large numbers of people to establish the plans, goals, and vision of the organization. Transformational leaders can inspire followers as they create a sense of shared vision (Bennis and Nanus, 1998). While vision and strategy are important, in this study they were not mentioned so much in the focus groups and interviews. Rather, it was the inspiration, invitation, and affection of the leader-member exchanges and the organizational influences of culture and structure that were important.

**Religious Basis for Behavioral Interaction.** It is important to emphasize that this study took place in church congregations, a particular type of voluntary nonprofit organization. From the perspective of organizational theory, the organizations may all be responding to broader institutional forces where structures are part of a ritualized mythology (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) or a response for demands to be isomorphic with other similar organizations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The explanation for relationships between servant leadership and organizational citizenship might be motivated by shared bases of faith. Perhaps in this setting, the enhancement of organizational citizenship by the presence of servant leadership should not be surprising given church teaching about parish life.

**Implications for Practice: Leadership Development**

Greenleaf suggests that servant leaders are actively involved in developing leadership among everyone in an organization. The question of whether the people in an organization are learning, growing, and developing as leaders is critical to the establishment of whether the organization has servant leadership. Servant leaders in a nonprofit organization are concerned not only about their personal...
development as a leader, but also about the development of leadership in others.

Managers and leaders in nonprofit disciplines, including social work, health care, education, and religion, are often selected to supervisory positions because of advanced degrees, seniority, or subject matter expertise. Their formal training is usually focused on their specific discipline, with perhaps one or two courses that introduce them to the technical aspects of financial and human resources management. For example, the study of leadership has not traditionally been a priority for clergy, neither during the seminary years nor in continuing education after ordination. Members of the clergy study theology and philosophy in preparation for parish ministry, and then find themselves in situations where they need to know more about leadership, management, and administration. Many have not studied leadership theory or considered the important role that leadership plays in the performance of parish life (Woodley, 1999).

The issues addressed here, such as how leadership works and why it affects organizational performance, receive too little attention. The training provided for nonprofit managers and leaders is woefully inadequate to the challenges that they will face. Generally leaders in the church are attracted to ministry because of an interest in working with people, not doing financial management or administrative paperwork (Kim, 2005). They are motivated by mission, not money (Brinckerhoff, 1999). To connect their work back to mission, McBrien (1994) recommends that clergy need to open up more opportunities for laypeople to use the gifts and talents they have toward the administration of the business side of the parish. Drucker (2007) advised pastors to call forth leadership in laypeople to cover for their possible weaknesses in areas such as financial management and to be mindful of their strengths in other areas of ministry such as liturgy and faith formation.

This article addresses some of the mechanics of how servant leadership works. However, many nonprofit organizations, including the Catholic church, are hierarchical organizations where the power distance between those in management and those on the front lines is not conducive to the elements of servant leadership discussed here. However, the examples we have provided demonstrate that even in the Catholic church, hierarchical obstacles to servanthood can be overcome. Servant leadership begins with a motivation to serve rather than to be served. Once a leader embraces that approach and uses the behaviors we have described, the invitation, inspiration, and affection of that leader will transform the culture and the structure. The hierarchical obstacles to servanthood will fade away. The organizational culture and structure will change as the practices of the leaders change.

Limitations

This study incorporated the results of only three Catholic parishes in southeast Iowa. The behaviors described in these churches
might generalize to other nonprofit settings; however, this study was unable to test other possibilities such as other denominations or religions, nonreligious groups, nonmembership organizations, or other geographical areas. As a qualitative study that described the parish behaviors, it was impossible to eliminate alternative explanations as to the success of these three parishes. The capacity of the study did not allow for inclusion of low-performing or average-performing parishes to distinguish what other factors might make a parish successful.

Future Research

This study identifies five leadership mechanisms that might explain the mechanics of servant leadership and organizational citizenship. If servant leadership does enhance organizational citizenship, as we suggest, and if organizational citizenship does enhance organizational performance, as extensive research suggests, then one can argue that servant leadership enhances organizational performance. The means toward realizing high performance in a congregation, as offered here, include very specific behaviors that can increase the effectiveness of parish leaders, regardless of their area of ministry.

In order to make these claims more boldly, more research is needed to generalize this study beyond its limitations and to test this model of servant leadership more broadly, seeking to confirm the proposed linkages of servant leadership and organizational citizenship in a variety of settings. The hope is to better understand these linkages in order to foster the growth and nurture the effectiveness of leaders and their organizations.

Conclusion

The servant leader is more inclined to serve than to be served, recognize rather than to be recognized, and empower rather than to flex positional power by commanding and controlling the response of followers. If leaders place themselves in humble service to their organization, recognize the gifts and talents of others, and call them forth through empowering actions, then the people will respond with organizational citizenship behaviors by helping each other, taking initiative, participating in various activities, and taking responsibility to continuously develop themselves as potential leaders of their organizations.

The interest in servant leadership seems to be driven at least in part by its association with religious teachings. As many organizations turn to servant leadership, it will be increasingly important to clarify exactly what it is and how it works. This study suggests that
servant leadership is more than a leadership style that fits normative advice and religious norms for leadership. Servant leadership not only fits the prescriptions of religion. It works.

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References


