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Servant Leadership: Implications for Human Resource Practices in a Church Context and Growth: A Review of Literature

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Abstract:

The leadership literature has significantly explored the servant leadership construct. Even though several studies linked servant leadership with organizational performance, there is inadequate literature relating servant leadership construct with human resource (HR) practices in the context of church and its growth. The paper reviewed extant conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature on the subject of servant leadership and attempts to integrate it with human resource practices that ultimately affects church context and growth. The study established that servant leadership constructs impacts positively on HR practices as well church growth in spiritual, numerical and financial dimensions. The review established the significance of servant leadership in steering modern organizational growth through empowerment of followers. The paper further proposes an appropriate integrated theoretical model that links the servant leadership constructs with human resource practices, church context and growth. Nonetheless, there is need for further research on effect of other leadership styles on HR practices within the church context.

Keywords: Servant leadership, human resource practices, commitment to people growth, community building, stewardship, church context, church growth

1. Introduction

1.1. Meaning and Emergence of Leadership and Servant Leadership

In pre-historic times, leadership construct was viewed from the function of control, power and domination, as for instance, the great man theory (Khan *et al*, 2016). In the 21st Century, servant leadership has emerged as a business strategy that could be used by organizations in gaining competitive advantage and success in turbulent environments hence becoming a highly sought commodity (Northouse, 2019). Leadership currently has attracted scholarly attention as a strategic asset that organizations should invest in so as to achieve organizational growth and productivity.

The leadership concept has been interpreted differently by various authors although there is convergence by many that it involves influence to followers to achievement of goals (Northouse, 2019). Leadership revolves around the leader, the followers, the situation, the influence means and the values (Northouse, 2019; Armstrong, 2014; and George, 2018). However, scholarly reviews on the leadership and servant leadership concepts indicate that none of these concepts has a specific definition. Nonetheless, there is an agreement that leadership is fluid and complex, viewed differently depending on dispensations and contexts. This kind of leadership resonates well with Jesus Christ style of leadership that underscored ethics and service to others. This study will delve on exploring servant leadership components of stewardship, commitment to growth of people and community building implications for Human Resource practices in a Church context and growth and their influence upon church growth.

On the other hand, servant leadership engages followers in relational, emotional and spiritual dimensions (Eva, 2019). It entails moral conviction and authority which demonstrates an ethical imperative that enhances growth to individuals and organizations they serve (Kimocho, 2019). Biblically, servant leadership was demonstrated by Jesus Christ through emphasis in service to others (Mark 10:44-45, John 13:14-15). Servant leadership revolves around the leader, the followers, the situation, and the influence the means, and the values (George, 2018; Northouse, 2019). Other pronounced servant leaders who echoed religious messages include: Martin Luther King Jr., Confucius and Mohandas Gandhi. Servant leadership is thus a catalyst to ethical behavior that impacts on leadership effectiveness through principles of respect, service, justice, honesty, and community (Northouse, 2019).

Servant leadership attracted scholarly interest for being value centered which empowers people to become effective, and ethical (SenSendjaya, 2015). It is unique in religious context as it underscores acceptable morals selflessness care of other hence yields positive outcome in organizational performance and growth (George, 2018; Northouse, 2019). It is suggested by literature reviews that servant leadership attributes when deployed in the church context could trigger growth and success through satisfaction and performance improvement (Mancuso 2021; Muriuki, 2020).

2. Statement of the Problem

Conceptually, there is a controversy on the meaning of leadership in general and as well as servant leadership. Even though there is a general consensus among leadership pundits that leadership entail influence upon followers in achievement of shared objectives (Yukl 2000; Northouse, 2019 and Muthimi&Kilika, 2018), leadership concept has been a paradox to researchers without a common definition. House & Aditya (1997), Bennis (1998), and Bergsteiner (2005) as cited by Muthimi and Kilika (2018), acknowledge that the concept is devoid of agreement and harmony. In the same vein, servant leadership lacks congruence in distinction of leaders and non-leaders or productive and nonproductive leadership. This paper intends to expand knowledge in the meaning of the construct of servant leadership and its impact on human resource practices and how this affects the church context and growth.

Theoretically, diverse scholarship explored servant leadership. According to leadership experts, servant leadership lacks clarity and coherence (Eva, 2019); there is no common theoretical framework on servant leadership concept (Northouse, 2019); it is difficult to operationalize servant leadership due to its unclear definition (Dierendonck, 2011). In a nutshell therefore, there is noticeable theoretical gap in meaning and clarity of the servant leadership concept that need for a new model to demystify the construct.

Contextually, servant leadership needs further interrogation to affirm whether its operationalization could benefit organizations and society at large. Due to meagre empirical studies on the subject (Parris & Peachey, 2013); it is deemed difficult to deduce practicality of the concept in positively impacting on people's behavior and organizational growth. Eva *et al* (2019), review on servant leadership underpinned prioritizing individual follower interests and needs that translate to service upon organizations and community at large. Generally, there is scanty research undertaken on servant leadership impact on the church context and growth. For instance, Ming (2005), investigated how servant leadership affects church growth but did not interlink the same to benefits to the society or incorporate the aspect of HR practices with servant leadership. This calls for further research that links servant leadership, HR practice and church growth.

Empirically, there are very limited studies that scholars have undertaken on servant leadership hence leaving a research gap in theory exploration in organizational settings (Parris & Peachey, 2013). According to McQuadean and Harrison (2020), there are only two servant leadership reviews: Eva *et al* (2018), and Parris & Peachey (2013). These reviews indicate that servant leadership can influence the efficiency and effectiveness in human resource practices like team work, reward and performance management. This enhances staff retention, reduces staff-turnover and improves organizational growth. In the foregoing, it is pertinent to undertake an assessment on how servant leadership affects human resource practices so as to develop a theoretical model that could assist organizations such as churches in improving their efficiencies and effectiveness. In addition, servant leadership remains understudied despite its use in organizations and boardrooms (Parris&Peachey, 2013; Bass & Bass, 2008, and Spears, 2005). This calls for further research on this area of leadership.

In view of the above research gaps in conceptual, theoretical, contextual and empirical dimensions, the paper seeks to contribute the current body of knowledge as well as attempt to bridge the gaps through bringing out relevant objects. This is crucial in leadership scholarship since integrating pieces of knowledge stand to benefit future scholars (Kilika, 2018).

The objective of the study is to review extant conceptual literature on the construct of servant leadership in the context of human resource practice and implication to church context and growth. It also reviews extant theoretical literature on the construct of servant leadership in the context of human resource practice and implication to church context and growth. In addition, it aims to review empirical literature on the construct of servant leadership in the context of human resource practice and implication to church context and growth. It further intends to propose a suitable conceptual framework for guiding research for the impact of servant leadership in the human resource practice and implication to church context and growth.

The significance of this review of literature is to ensure there is a new model that integrates scattered servant leadership literature with human resource which subsequently affects church contexts and growth. Such knowledge contributes to insight knowledge of interlink of these constructs that help, organizations and specifically the church in triggering growth through adoption of policies that are favorable to leadership. Further, the review provides insight on the servant leadership phenomena that becomes a step forward in extending its theoretical framework. It provides room for further research for academicians as well as insight on best practices by organizational managers, for instance; in hiring, reward management and performance management.

The study methodology was confined to desk review that entailed review of secondary data through various sources including scholarly peer reviewed articles, relevant books, websites, libraries, visual and audio materials. Cresswell (2014), suggests text messages, videos and other visual literature as key in the qualitative study. Data bases like Emerald, Google Scholar, and Science Direct were searched. Reviews mostly targeted literature materials of less than eight (8) years period of publishing.

3. Conceptual Review

This paper intends to review extant conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature on the subject of servant leadership and make attempts to integrate it with human resource practices that ultimately affect church context and growth. However, there is lack of consensus in the meaning and application of the concept of leadership (Muthimi&Kilika, 2018). In the foregoing, the paper explored review of two sub constructs of servant leadership namely; commitment to growth of people, and building community that are viewed as crucial and comprehensive in servant leadership construct (Northouse, 2019; Parris & Peachey, 2013).

3.1. Community Building

Community building as a servant leadership component is a potential phenomenon that can impact greatly on human resource practices. An organization requires leaders that care when handling human resource practices like discipline and promotions. Such leaders encourage and motivate workers for high morale and productivity in the organization. Munroe (2014), underscores character as a quality of servant leadership as vision; academic and intellectual superiority; dynamic oratory and other communication skills but the power to persuade; management expertise; and the ability to control others. Greenleaf (1998), underscores listening, empathy and unconditional acceptance of other people. Spears (2010), as cited by Mcquadean and Harrison (2020), identified nine characteristics of a servant leader namely: Listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth of people, and building community. These characteristics give meaning of life to the servant leader. Empowering followers is crucial in servant leadership for enables leaders to serve, practice work ethics and being follower centered, giving priority to interests of other people, and act in ways that benefit others (Dutta and Khatri, 2017). These virtues of servant leadership inspire church members to support the leadership hence impacts on church growth.

3.2. Commitment to Growth of People

Commitment to the growth of people covers healing and persuasion attributes of servant leadership style. Humility drives commitment to serve others and grow others especially when one feels good about themselves (Christensen, 2017). Character is also crucial in growing people for it enhances trust among the followership (Amukobole, 2012). Northouse (2019), cites Spears (2005) who identified ten (10) characteristics of servant leadership namely: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth of people and building community. These characteristics are key constructs that forms the lead construct of servant leadership in this study. Servant leadership enhances people's growth as well as affecting organizational growth. Servant leadership is follower-centered which entails leaders' commitment to make personal sacrifices to grow other people's potential (SenSendjaya, 2015).

3.3. Human Resource Practices

Human resource (HR) practices are broad and includes, hiring, training, disciplinary control, reward management systems, performance management and retirement management. HR practice can influence worker's characteristics in terms of motivation, commitment, engagement and skill hence affecting organizational performance in aspects of productivity, quality and effective customer services (Armstrong, 2014). Servant leadership attributes are viewed by many scholars to trigger HR practices through motivation hence encourage growth. In this study, servant leadership approaches are impacts HR practices subsequently affecting church context and growth.

3.4. Church Growth

According to the Old Testament of the Bible, the church stands for 'gathering', 'congregation or 'assembly' (Deuteronomy 9:10 and 1 Samuel 17:47, NIV). In the New Testament it is viewed as the body of Christ or congregation of believers of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:28, NIV). The Church is a living organism and it grows like any other living animal or plant. It can grow through birth of new believers or transfer to different church. Jesus (2018), opined that Church growth is the numerical increase of people in a church over a period of time. These could be members, converts and those baptized.

In this study, church growth is the outcome of servant leadership impact on HR practices. The purpose of the church is to make disciples and evangelists who in turn spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world (Mathew 28:19-20). This is achieved through the following ways: Teaching biblical doctrines, undertaking the Lord's supper, prayer, proclaiming the Gospel of salvation, ministering to the needy and equipping of Gospel workers (Woranche, 2012). Church growth basically entails increase of faith among believers (maturity) and numerical increase of converts into Christian faith that ultimately results in financial and material expansion (Ming, 2015). Church growth is referred to as the act of bringing people into fellowship with Jesus Christ, to have a personal relationship with him, and into becoming responsible church members (Ikenye, 2010; Wagner, 1972 in Worache, 2012). Russel (2002) affirmed that functional attributes of servant leadership cause transformation to both individuals and organizations hence improving church growth.

3.5. Church Context

The church as an organization is unique and its demonstration of servant leadership empowers people to be effective and ethical (SenSendjaya, 2015). The key components of the church institutional context are: Biblical culture, love, care, equity, integrity and empowerment that Chipenyu (2021) explains as unity and love among Christians. Biblical culture basically entails adhering to the values and principles of Christianity. Northouse (2019), posits that one should always treat other people's decisions and values with respect. Love is a unique value and command from God to his followers (John 13:34). Caring for others in the other hand is a servant leadership virtue that demonstrate practical love. The leadership is expected to care for the followership and vice-versa for relationship to suffice. Integrity in servant leadership in the church context revolves around ethics as a central component.

Ethical leadership in a church setting attracts trust resulting to positive impact on church growth. Servant leadership is a catalyst to ethical behavior that impacts on leadership effectiveness through principles of respect, service, justice, honesty, and community (Northouse, 2019). According to Oginde (2017), integrity and character are admired attributes of a leaders who demonstrates consistency as well influence upon followers. Empowerment entail the leadership

support to the followership and vice-versa for achievement of organizational goals. Heidari et al (2019), explored on the relationship between servant leadership and followers' empowerment among sports coaches of national teams in Iran which revealed that servant leadership success is determined by followership empowerment. In this study, church context works with HR practices as moderators to influence church growth.

3.6. Outcome of Servant Leadership on HR Practice and Church Growth

Out of the literature review, there is a convergence in thinking by a number of researchers that servant leadership impacts of organizational success positively (Saleemet *al*,2020, Miterer, 2017, Olesiaet *al*, 2015, Dutta and Khatri, 2017, Russell,2017, and Ming, 2005). According to these studies, servant leadership improves management of human resources through motivation of employees in performance improvement through encouragement growth, building of trust and increasing worker's morale in achievement of organizational goals. The aftermath of these actions is increase of productivity. In the church context, reviews of the mentioned literature indicate growth of the church in spiritual, numerical and financial dimensions.

Servant leadership is holistic in nature as it involves leaders and followers through authenticity focus, service orientation, spiritual encouragement, relationship emphasis and transformational influence in a way that both the leader and follower become what they are intended to be (SenSendjaya, 2015). In this study, servant leadership is viewed as a factor that exerts influence on HR practices holistically in a way to trigger church growth.

4. Review of Relevant Theories

A number of theories support servant leadership, human resource and organizational growth concepts. These theories include: Greenleaf, Spears, Evaet *al* and Parris and Peachey, Institutional and Path-Goal Theories.

4.1. Greenleaf Theory of Servant Leadership

Greenleaf (1970), opines that servant leaders do not prioritize control and power but put service to people first. Russell (2016), points out three questions posed by Greenleaf that help to understand the theory of servant leadership. Firstly, 'do people being served grow?' Secondly, 'Do they become wiser, healthier, freer, autonomous and servant leaders?' Thirdly, 'What is the effect of the leadership to the most underprivileged in society; will they benefit from the leadership?' In a nutshell, according the theory, it is not about reduced position but enhanced power through empathy and service.

Greenleaf (1970) theory was underscored by Evaet *al* (2019) and Parris and Peachey (2013), empirical reviews. Eva's review defined servant leadership as other-oriented, prioritizing follower individual interests and needs and concern for organization and larger community. In addition, Eva (2019), points out that servant leadership succeeds if organizational culture provides support to leaders. Parris and Peachey (2013), opines viability of servant leadership in the aspect of effectiveness of teams and individuals. These findings are key in this study as they indicate that servant leadership can influence the efficiency and effectiveness in human resource practices like team work and performance management. Greenleaf's theory comes in handy for it underpins significance of leadership that underscores service which enhances staff retention and reduces staff-turnover in organizational context. In the church context, servant leadership attributes of growth of people and community building empowers church members through love and care in growing spiritually. Spiritual growth further impacts positively on numerical and financial growth.

4.2. Stewardship Theory

Stewardship contributes to better human resource practices by ensuring employees are motivated, satisfied and committed to the organization as leaders are stewards who serve followers (SenSendjaya,2015). Ming (2005) investigated servant leadership and church growth which revealed that growth of people and community building contribute to a sense of direction, empowerment and partnership within people through empowerment, inclusivity and corporate citizenship and social responsibility. These practices empower and binds leaders and followers together in achieving organizational goals (Dutta & Khatri, 2017). Spears' theoretical model as cited by Reinke (2004) grouped servant leadership attributes of healing, persuasion, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of people to form 'Stewardship.' In this study stewardship theory is relevant as it demonstrates that leaders are trustees of the people and should ensure they get empowered to grow their organizations and in this context the church.

4.3. Self-determination Theory

This is an implicit followership theory whom founders, Deci and Ryan (2000) asserts that, it entails internal people growth and psychological needs (Schulte, 2020). It deals with motivation of people through inherent tendencies without external influence. In empirical research on self-determination theory (SDT), Teixeira *et al* (2012), revealed that autonomous motivation empowers sports persons through excitement and intrinsic satisfaction to perform well. This theory is crucial in the Church context and growth since congregants' growth can be inspired through autonomous motivation that provides support, involvement and competence.

4.4. Motivation Theory

Fredrick Herzberg theory posits that employee's satisfaction is anchored on two factors; hygiene issues and motivators (Alshmemri et al,2017). Hygiene factors include salary, working conditions, policies and supervision whereas motivators; work, achievement, responsibility, recognition and advancement. When hygiene factors are taken care of,

motivating factors create employee satisfaction. Greenleaf (1970) argues that the priority of a servant leader is concern of follower needs as a priority. Motivation theory enhances employee organizational commitment as opposed to control hence achievement of high levels of performance (Armstrong, 2014). In the church context, motivation of church members by their servant leaders could trigger love, unity and progress in church growth.

5. An Emerging Case for a New Theoretical Model

The study proposes a conceptual model informed by gaps revealed in the conceptual and theoretical reviews on extant literature. The purpose of the model is to assess and explain servant leadership implications on human resource practices of which expected outcome is church growth. Servant leadership is the lead construct with sub indicators of growth of people and community building. The intervening variables of church context and human resource practice impacts on the dependent variable which is church growth.

The justification of the new model firstly emanates from pursuit for advancement of knowledge in the frontiers of servant leadership. A number of researchers including Ming (2005), McQuadean and Harrison (2020), Eva et al (2018), and Parris and Peachey (2013) demonstrated that servant leadership has implications on organizational performance. The new model rests on the premises of clarifying the constructs that form the emerging phenomena. Besides, researchers 'intent to fill the research gap on leadership and specifically servant leadership justifies the model.

5.1. Proposed Conceptual Model

The study revealed several gaps in the theoretical and empirical reviews. In order to address the gaps, a proposed theoretical model is developed to explain the linkage between four constructs of the study: servant leadership, human resource practices, church context, and church growth. The model is summarized in figure 1.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model

Figure 1: Conceptual Model Linking Servant Leadership, HR Practices with Church Context and Growth

5.2. Linkage between Servant Leadership, Church Context, and Church Growth

In the theoretical and empirical reviews, it was revealed that constructs of servant leadership community building and commitment to grow people do have impact on employee's behavior including increased motivation, commitment thus leading to high performance (Northouse, 2019; Spears, 2005). In the same vein, human resource practice underscores increasing morale of workers for higher performance (Mwangangi, 2018 as cited by Muthimi & Kilika, 2018) morale and motivation of employees results to increased performance. The holistic and multi-dimensional nature of servant leadership enables it produce desirable outcome (SenSendjaya, 2015).

6. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to come up with suitable model of servant leadership relationships among identified constructs in the emergent phenomenon. A number of studies revealed that servant leadership as a construct was found to have impact on performance and organizational growth positively. Justification of a new model is due to scanty literature that explores the outcome of servant leadership in human resource practice and in overall organizational performance. In terms of empirical reviews, there is a glaring gap in terms of the number of variables that should be used

in a study hence causing a contradiction. A number of studies provided evidence that servant leadership outcomes improve performance, organizational commitment, and employee satisfaction (Schaubroeck *et al*, 2011, Scheider and George, 2011; Liden *et al* (2008), Peterson *et al* 2012 as cited by SenSendiya, 2015). However, limited research relates servant leadership with HR and church growth.

In this study it emerges that Church growth in spiritual, numerical and financial dimensions is influenced by servant leaders whose priority is to grow, build and serve people. The conceptual framework composes of four propositions described below:

- Proposition 1 Growth of people impacts on practices of hiring where fairness would be observed thus enhancing church growth as effective personnel would be engaged.
- Proposition 2 There is a correlation between community building, growth of people with motivation and commitment of workers hence demonstrating love and care that in turn triggers spiritual growth
- Proposition 3 Community building impacts on HR practices through church contexts attributes that enhance church growth.
- Proposal 4 Church context and church growth act as moderator and outcome constructs respectively to servant leadership and HR Practices.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of the paper was to undertake a review of existing conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature with a view to understand servant leadership and its implications to human resource practice upon church context and growth. There is no consensus on the distinct definition of leadership (Muthimi and Kilika, 2018), and there is diversity of theories and multiple measurements that examine the concept (Parris and Pearcey, 2013). Nonetheless, the study established that servant leadership constructs impacts on HR practices as well church growth in dimensions of spirituality, numerical and financial increase. The review established significance of servant leadership in alleviating organizational challenges and enhancing growth of people (Eva, 2019; Greenleaf, 1977); as well as making them stewards in resource management (Van Dierendonck, 2011; SenSendjaya, 2015). Although servant leadership contributes to higher performance and growth of organizations, further research needs to be undertaken on its meaning and impacts on HR and church growth. Such research should aim at developing a congruent integration of servant leadership attributes, theories and methodologies to have a common understanding of the concept and ways it impacts church growth and context.

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