Research Paper

Servant Leadership: Conceptualisation Operationalised by Empirical Studies

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ABSTRACT:
With a view to ascertain conceptualisations of servant leadership being used in empirical studies and to find if "servant leadership" has been defined in same terms by researchers across the papers, we reviewed a small sample of empirical studies searched on Google Scholar. Further, we tried to ascertain if servant leadership has a direct impact on desirable behavioural and attitudinal outcomes in the organisational context or it works through mediators. We found that there are similarities and dissimilarities over what comprises servant leadershipand Scholars have operationalised in their empirical studies the servant leadership comprising of dimensions which are varied in different studies. However, there are commonalities as well. One such commonality as that servant leadership is characterised by interest of followers being given priority over other interests.

I. INTRODUCTION

Servant Leadership is a topic of importance as it has potential to increase follower desirable behavioural and attitudinal outcomes (Liden et al., 2014). Before an extensive study of extant literature could be taken up, we have reviewed a sample of the empirical research works on servant leadership to throw light on the construct "servant leadership" as operationalised by empirical works in the last decade. Our focus is to find out if the same meaning is attached to the construct by the scholars of the area, or if means different things to different scholars. We tried to review a sample of papers from different geographical contexts. Before a systematic review could be planned, we reviewed a sample of papers to find out how the construct has been defined and operationalized in empirical studies. The objective of this study is finding answers to the basic research questions, "What conceptualisations of servant leadership have been used by the empirical studies? Whether "servant leadership"has been defined in same terms by researchers across the papers? Whether servant leadership has a direct impact on desirable behavioural and attitudinal outcomes in the organisational context or it works through mediators? We found that there are similarities and dissimilarities over what comprises servant leadership.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gau and Dierendonk (2011), based on existing concepts of service leadership developed by Greenleaf, 1977; Farling et al., 1999; Liden et al., 2008; Lord et al., 1999; Molyneaux, 2003; Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006) developed a conceptual framework of servant leadership. They asserted that under servant leadership, the leaders create challenging work conditions for the highly talented people to allow the development of their followers to their fullest potential, psychologically empower them by building their self-confidence and thus get their whole-hearted commitment to organisation. Specifically, servant-leadership is having a positive association to challenging work conditions, which in turn is positively related to psychological empowerment of employees,

and which ultimately results in organisational commitment. This is because the organisation's efforts to positively engineer the workplace are in sync with employees' positive views of the organisation. They carried out this study to discuss role of servant leadership in contributing to challenging work conditions and its relationship to empowerment and organisational commitment.

Searle and Barbuto (2011) conceptualised servant leadership as a force that foster positive behaviour in others (Liden et al., 2008; Lopez & Snyder, 2003). They developed a conceptual model that describes that many micro and macropositive psychology variables facilitate the relationship between servant leadership and performance impact. In this framework, the five constructs (altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, wisdom, organisational stewardship) of servant leadership are shown to have impact on organisational performance through various micro (individual/group) level or macro (organisational) level positive psychology behaviour or variables. This study employed hope (micro positive behaviour) and organizational virtuousness (macro positive behaviour) the preliminary analysis. They proposed that empirical work could be done to check whether hope or organizational virtuousness will mediate the relationship between servant leadership and increased performance.

Hussain and Ali (2012) conceptualised that servant leadership as a connection between leaders and followers in which leaders are committed enough to their followers by displaying motivational and inspirational values having positive relationship with employee performance, namely love, empowerment, vision, humility and trust. They based their work on an integrated model developed by Patterson (2003) and Winston (2004). The Patterson-Winston model advocates that the followers of a servant leader would show a higher-level of loyalty towards their leaders than others. Patterson, (2003) states servant leaders as the leaders who guide the organisation giving due emphasis on followers, giving them priority over organisational concerns. They conducted this study to examine impact of servant leadership on followers' job performance to through five servant leader dimensions: love, empowerment, vision, humility, trust.They studied technicians working in engineering branch of an aviation set up in Pakistanand their argument in favour of it is that that private sector was expected to apply the latest leadership strategies.

Auxier (2013)conceptualised the servant leadership with regard to a business organization's viability in order to find out the predictability of servant leader attributes on sales performance of salespersons in the healthcare industry. The servant leadership will result into a more viable business organisation if there exists a strong link between servant leadership characteristics and sales performance. He took servant leadership as a concept and practice of leadership that regards the general good of followers over the self-interest of the leader (Laub, 1999). Servant leadership can be categorized into attributes: (a) developing and empowering others, (b) humility, (c) authentic leadership, (d) open, participatory leadership, (e) inspiring leadership, (f) visionary leadership, and (g) courageous leadership (Wong & Page, 2003). These seven factors are considered as major constructs that describe servant leadership in action to be measured by the Servant Leadership Profile—Revised (SLPR) given by Wong and Page (2003). SLPR is adopted in this study to measure servant leadership.

Zhang, Lin and Fong (2012)conceptualised servant leadership with the slogan: "First to serve, then to lead" (Crippen, 2006). To serve first and then to lead is the motto of servant leader. Service seems to be a natural activity of the progressive leaders who have a realisation that too much focus on ego and self can throttle and ultimately suffocate the best aspects of human nature (Jacobsen, 1999). According to Greenleaf (1991), the servant leader is referred as to be servant first and therefore is distinct from the leaders who act as "leader" first. Equally significant is that the servant leader should equip with moral courage. Since the focus of study was education sector in Singapore, they considered some localized leadership theories or practices. In the context of Singapore, some implications of servant leadership such as service learning for student teachers (Roberts, 2006) and principal mentoring (Wallace, 2009) were introduced in teacher training and leadership mentoring (Lim and Low, 2007). They surveyed teachers in Singapore.

Mahembe and Englebrecht (2013) opined that service leadership is not a new concept and one can find glimpse of it in the practice of leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr and Mother Theresa, who promoted it as being the way to approach leadership (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). The concept, however, re-appeared in academic literature with the seminal work of Robert Greenleaf, who conceived the term 'servant leadership' more than 30 years ago (Dannhauser, 2007).They referred servant leadership as a concept and practice of leadership in which a leader places the good of their followers above his or her own self-interest. A servant leader has a genuine dedication to his or her followers A servant leader has true commitment towards his or her followers and mainly serves the needs of followers, thereby offering vision and empowerment, with service being the prime activity of the servant leader (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Spears, 2010). They mentioned that earlier research has proved that followers who are empowered show more commitment and when employees get empowered, they display a greater level of self-confidence and a greater sense of being able to impact their work environment positively (Zhu, May & Avolio, 2004). Thus, servant leadership can assist businesses in determining how to improve team performance by increasing resilience and productive time and reducing simultaneously the negative aspects like exhaustion and absenteeism. They developed a conceptual

framework explaining the causal relationship among servant leadership, affective team commitment and team effectiveness.

III. CONCLUSION

We found that scholars have operationalized the servant leadership on the basis of Greenleaf, 1977; Farling et al., 1999; Liden et al., 2008; Lord et al., 1999; Molyneaux, 2003; Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006 and Dennis and Bocarnea, 2004 and Lopez & Snyder, 2003. Scholars have operationalised in their empirical studies the servant leadership comprising of five dimensions altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, wisdom, organisational stewardship(Searle and Barbuto, 2011). On the other hand, researchers (Hussain and Ali, 2012) have worked on five servant leader dimensions: love, empowerment, vision, humility, trust. While Auxier (2013) based on past studies, operationalized servant leadership on the basis of attributes that comprise it –developing and empowering others, humility,authentic leadership, open, participatory leadership, inspiring leadership, visionary leadership, and courageous leadership. Scholars operationalized servant leadership based on the models given by previous studies being characterised by giving priority to the followers over the organisational concerns (Hussain and Ali, 2012) and over self-interest of the leader (Mahembe and Englebrecht, 2013; Auxier, 2013) and also as a force that foster positive behaviour in others (Searle and Barbuto, 2011). Servant leadership is characterised by service (Zhang, Lin and Fong, 2012 based on Jacobsen, 1999).

Scholars have studied indirect impact of leadership on desirable attitudes and behaviours through challenging work conditions, empowerment (Gau and Dierendonk, 2011), hope and organizational virtuousness (Searle and Barbuto, 2011).Servant leader creates challenging conditions for the followers and empower them to meet the challenges, thereby helping them attain their protential. And thus, winning commitment of the followers (Gau and Dierendonk, 2011). Similarly, studies have confirmed mediation role of hope and organizational virtuousness between servant leadership and performance (Searle and Barbuto, 2011). The scholars have studied direct role of servant leadership on attitudes and behaviours of followers and have also studied mediators between the servant leadership and desirable organisational outcomes.

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