

Chapter 2

The Controlled Discipline of Servant Leaders: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates claims by Johnson (2001) and Bowie (2000) that servant leaders tend not to assert authority. Twenty servant leaders were asked five open-ended questions about their use of discipline with outcomes of the discipline ranging from more training for subordinates to termination. Analysis of the responses resulted in 39 themes and 8 qualitative truths about servant leaders' use of discipline. Participants were included in the study if: (a) each scored above 3.5 on the Shepherd Leadership Inventory, (b) were leading or have led a team of at least three followers, and (c) held such a position for at least three years. This study provides a qualitative base for future research into servant leaders' use of discipline.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to investigate claims by Johnson (2001) and Bowie (2000) that servant leaders tend not to assert authority. Johnson argued that servant leadership encourages passivity and can be associated with the negative connotation of the term servant (or slave). Bowie posited that followers may easily manipulate servant leaders that place capital in attributes like (a) love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision (e) trust, (f) service and (g) empowerment. Graham (1991) added to this concern when Graham contended that the notion of putting the welfare of followers above the organization may become problematic to short-term performance objectives of the firm. Stated another way, when organizations are forced to downsize, outsource or cut wages, the servant leader construct may experience tension.

BACKGROUND

Riordan (2010), over a 20-year period, studied the careers of more than 1,500 people and discovered that traits such as being courteous, trusting, good-natured, cooperative, and tolerant can deter one's career progress and muddle one's effectiveness as a leader. Thus, according to Riordan, on the job, 'nice guys' may finish last.

Hackman (2002) seemingly echoes Riordan's (2010) observation that being too 'nice' may undermine leadership efficacy. More specifically, Hackman states that, "...at some point those who have legitimate authority for the enterprise must step up to their responsibility and clearly designate the mountain to be climbed... Unless leaders are insistent and unapologetic about exercising their authority, effective team self-management cannot occur" (p. 82). A feasible inference from both Riordan and Hackman's assertion may be that the attributes of nice leaders (which which might be associated with servants) short-circuit their ability to influence.

According to Johnson (2009), the above assertions may all be contributing factors to why some perceive servant leadership as a weak construct. Johnson elaborates by stating that, "Skepticism about servant leadership may stem in part from a misunderstanding that equates service with weakness. Servant leaders need to be tough. Sometimes the best way to serve someone is to reprimand or fire that person" (p. 179).

On the other hand, there are theological and theoretical perspectives that suggest that servants have the capability to rightly exercise authority. The first theological example can be found in the gospel of Luke 13:6-9. Within this text, Jesus, the epitome of a servant, shares the following story from which scholars of leadership can possibly abstract principles to reprimand followers.

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' ⁸ He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

This parable reveals that a fig tree was placed within a particular context for a span of three years. During this timeframe, the fig tree did not produce. This lack of productivity debatably invoked frustration and immediately made it an eligible candidate to be removed. However, before conceding to the obvious choice of termination, Jesus advocates for more time, digging around it and fertilizing the tree. If such treatment or discipline did not mitigate the problem, the text then suggests that Jesus at this point, endorses the approach of "cutting it down."

Another theological text that illuminates a servant leader's comfort to reprimand is found in Mk 11:15-17.

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