Chapter 4
Servant Leadership Practices in a Volunteer-Led Organization

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ABSTRACT

Recent research on the leadership behavior of leaders in a large, volunteer-led community service organization uncovered several leadership practices that are consistent with those of servant leadership. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight volunteer leaders whose scores on the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) indicated they engaged in the five practices of exemplary leadership: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. During the course of the interviews, evidence of servant leadership behavior emerged. This chapter identifies the specific leadership behavior described, connects these findings to other research on servant leadership, and provides initial conclusions, implications for practice, and possible avenues for further research.

INTRODUCTION

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics [USBLS] (2011), "About 62.8 million people volunteered through or for an organization at least once between September 2009 and September 2010" ("Number and Type of Organizations," para. 2). Of that total, 13.6%, or 11.7 million people, volunteered primarily through a civic, social, or community service organization (USBLS, 2011). These organizations rely heavily on volunteers to assume leadership positions.

In contrast to other nonprofits, civic, social, and community service organizations are historically volunteer-led and are also unique in their reliance on volunteers leading other volunteers at all levels. Volunteer leaders must motivate other volunteers to choose to follow. Volunteer leaders must consider the needs, motivations, and goals of those they lead. Without the traditional forms of authority and motivation inherent in paid positions, volunteer leaders must connect with followers in other ways in order to be successful.

Volunteers accept the responsibility of leadership but lack the authority inherent in paid leadership positions. Salacuse (2006) discussed the challenges faced by individuals in leadership positions with limited authority to direct behavior;

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he described this situation as leading leaders. The characteristics of leaders in follower positions described by Salacuse also describe volunteers following volunteer leaders. These individuals understand that the organization needs them. Volunteer-based organizations cannot survive without volunteers. In volunteer-led organizations, volunteers often select their leaders. Leaders hold their positions by virtue of their election or selection to those positions by followers. Volunteers have loyalties both to other groups within the organization and to groups outside the organization. Volunteers are often more loyal to specific programs and projects than to organization leaders. Volunteers may not see themselves as followers. They are often leaders in their professional positions and are unlikely to respond to traditional methods of motivation (Salacuse, 2006). This suggests that volunteer leaders must engage in leadership practices that are specifically focused on meeting these challenges: leading without formal sources of power and leading volunteers who can freely choose whether or not to follow.

Original research conducted in 2012 in a large, volunteer-led community service organization attempted to measure and describe the leadership behavior of volunteer leaders (Bowers, 2012). The research included 75 volunteer leaders and 105 observers of those volunteer leaders. Leadership behavior was measured using the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) and further explored through semi-structured interviews with eight of the volunteer leader participants. In the course of that research, evidence of several servant leadership practices emerged (Bowers, 2012). The purpose of this chapter is to present the evidence of the practice of servant leadership, discuss this evidence in the context of other research of volunteer leaders and servant leadership, posit implications for volunteer-led organizations, and suggest several avenues for future investigation.

BACKGROUND

The theory of servant leadership, as presented by Greenleaf (2002), embraces a positive, ethical and just focus on the concept of leadership. It considers the possibility that society would be improved if only all leaders would be servants first and leaders second. According to Greenleaf (2002), to be a servant leader an individual must first desire to serve. The aspiration to lead is secondary. Ideally, followers themselves would desire to serve as a result of their experience being led by a servant leader (Greenleaf, 2002). According to Laub (2004), "Servant leadership is not a leadership style that can be used or set aside based on the needs of the situation. Servant Leadership is a mindset, a paradigm, a way of leading" (p. 9).

Describing and Measuring Servant Leadership

Greenleaf's (2002) discussion of servant leadership is abstract and therefore difficult to put into practice and to measure. Several researchers have worked to develop models and scales to delineate specific characteristics and behaviors of servant leaders and to measure the degree to which servant leadership is practiced both within organizations and by individuals. In 2006, Barbuto and Wheeler published a scale to measure eleven dimensions of servant leadership. These included calling, listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, growth, and community building.

More recently, Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora (2008) published the results of their work to develop a multidimensional measure of servant leadership, the Servant Leadership Behavior Scale. The result was a six-dimension scale that includes Voluntary Subordination, Authentic Self, Covenantal Relationship, Responsible Morality, Transcendental Spirituality, and Transforming Influence. Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora (2008)