Cross-Cultural Understanding of Power in Servant Leadership Theory:
Comparing the Concept of *Empowerment*
and its Implications upon Servant Leadership Theory
as Applied in South Africa and the United States

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Abstract

The adoption of Servant Leadership Theory by various institutions has emerged as a popular trend among management leaders in both South Africa and the United States. The Servant Leadership model aligns well with the traditional South African concept of *Ubuntu* as well as the American ethos of democracy built on a Judeo-Christian worldview. Cultural assumptions underlying the perception of empowerment, one of the central Servant Leadership components, have significantly effected the practical applicability of this theory. Although a growing number of American institutions have implemented some form of Servant Leadership, South Africa has thus far not embraced it much beyond verbal theoretical affirmation. This paper argues that understanding cultural influences upon the concept of empowerment within the leadership dynamic is essential to help explain this phenomenon and to propose a way forward for both settings.

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Introduction

Leadership theory is a relatively new area of study. Gary Yukl writes that credible research in this field did not begin until the twentieth century (Yukl, 2002). Northouse notes that early studies in leadership traits occurred in the 1940's. These ideas progressed into leadership skills, styles, behaviors and situations. Current models of leadership entail research into the interactive relationships of these factors along with more abstract considerations such as values and ethics (Northouse, 2004).

A leadership theory that appears to be gaining increasing global credibility is servant leadership (Spears, 2004). Introduced in 1969 by Robert Greenleaf, servant leadership emphasizes a Judeo-Christian ethic of service to others. According to Greenleaf, followers who are genuinely served reciprocate with high motivation, creativity, perseverance and loyalty (Greenleaf, 1977). Although early investigations in servant leadership lacked empirical analysis, Cerff and Winston have proposed eight attributes through which servant leadership can be more carefully studied (2006). One of these attributes, empowerment, will be examined from the point of view of two cultures, South Africa and the United States.

The Rise of Servant Leadership in the United States

According to Levering and Moskowitz (2000) a growing number of American companies, including Southwest Airlines, TDIndustries and Synovus Financial have adopted the servant leadership model. Additionally, Larry Spears (2004), president of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, notes that American authorities on leadership

such as Covey, Dupree and Blanchard continue to reflect the influence of servant

leadership theory. Spears' dramatically describes its significant growth among American

organizations.

> As many small trickles of water feed the mightiest of rivers, the growing
> number of individuals and organizations practicing servant-leadership has
> increased into a torrent, one that carries with it a deep current of meaning
> and passion (Spears, 2004:1).

The research of Levering and Moskowitz (2000), reinforces Spears' description.

The Rise of Servant Leadership in South Africa

Nelson (2003) investigated the relevance of servant leadership among black

leaders in South Africa. He conducted interviews using Patterson's factors of servant

leadership and found broad acceptance for it. Many participants saw strong

correspondence between servant leadership and the African concept of *Ubuntu.*

According to Haegert (2000), *Ubuntu* comes from the Xhosa phrase, "*Umuntu*

ngumuntu ngabanu," meaning "a person is a person through other persons." Ubuntu

connects the leader to the followers in an interdependent relationship that identifies the

leader with the follower's welfare. Patterson's servant leadership factors: (1) love, (2)

humility, (3) altruism, (4) incorporation of the follower's vision, (5) trust, (6)

empowerment, (7) service (Winston and Bekker, 2004) corresponded well with the

Ubuntu ideal.

Despite the verbal enthusiasm for Patterson's servant leadership model, Nelson

(2003) also found skepticism among research subjects concerning its applicability in

South Africa. Winston and Bekker (2004) observed three factors that emerged in

Nelson's research which hindered implementation of servant leadership in South Africa:

low trust, lack of effective empowerment, and negative connotations with the term

"servant."

While the third factor presents an important semantic challenge, the first two

obstacles, trust and empowerment, remain fundamental to the implementation of the

servant leadership model. These two issues are both directly related to the concept of

power in the Bantu mindset. Western ontological concepts of power stand in contrast to

those associated with Ubuntu. Addressing this difference may provide a way forward in

the application of servant leadership in South Africa.

American Empowerment Assumptions in Servant Leadership

Within North America the understanding of empowerment remains substantively

consistent. Consistent with this perspective, Conger and Kanungo (1988) elevate

empowerment above the idea of mere enabling or delegation, which they regard as "too

constrictive in scope to accommodate the complex nature of empowerment" (1988:474).

Positively, they define empowerment as:

> A process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational
> members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness
> and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and
> informal techniques of providing efficacy information (1988:474).

Delegation within the parameters of the directives of a leader seeking to maintain control,

is not empowerment. Empowerment includes entrusting subordinates with self-

determination, self-efficacy and the potential for real impact (Yukl, 2002) even when

disagreements emerge.

Leadership confidence to exercise empowerment comes from what Covey (1997)

describes as an "abundance mentality" (1997:219) associated with power. "It is the

paradigm that there is plenty out there and enough to spare for everybody. It results in sharing of prestige, of recognition, of profits, of decision making" (1997:220). Empowerment requires the belief that power exists as a potentially limitless commodity that can be safely given away without fearing a loss of influence.

While not all leaders in the United States possess an abundance mentality, the Judeo-Christian cultural climate in America (where servant leadership theory emerged) generally supports this mindset. The growing number of American companies that successfully promote servant leadership in their corporate policy and practice attests to this fact (Spears, 2004).

South African Empowerment Assumptions in Servant Leadership

The concepts of servant leadership align well with the African ideal of Ubuntu. Yet Winston and Bekker (2004) note:

> By observation and anecdotal accounts of leaders in South Africa, collected between 2000 and 2003 by the authors of this article, the predominate leadership style was, for the most part, the same command and control dictatorial paternalistic leadership style that prevailed in pre-1994 South Africa (2004:7).

This problematic gap between conceptual support and practical avoidance of servant leadership requires an explanation.

Although part of the answer lies in the destructive influences of apartheid (Winston and Bekker, 2004), a more fundamental cause exists in the cultural discrepancy between the Bantu and American understanding of power. While using the same terminology, a significant gap may exist in meaning. Barry Hallen (1997) writes that identical terms are often used with different meanings between Africa and the West. The term *empowerment* used in a conversation between an African and an American contain

meaningful semantic overlap. Yet there remains the likelihood that important differences exist.

During classes for a Master's level leadership course taught in Nairobi by Chin (2000), discussions with students about the nature of power frequently developed. The Kenyans observed that many African leaders remain influenced by power assumptions stemming from African animism. Power within this worldview is a finite commodity entrusted to a leader as a particular authority figure. According to the research of Shatzberg (1993), this power is characterized by "its unity and indivisibility. Contrary to the Western experience, power here cannot easily be divided, or shared" (1993:447). As a result, in leadership the power at ones disposal is viewed as a limited resource to be guarded with great care. Covey's (1989) scarcity mentality applies.

> They see life as having only so much, as though there were only one pie out there. And if someone were to get a big piece of the pie, it would mean less for everybody else. The Scarcity Mentality is the zero-sum paradigm of life (p. 219).

Even among leaders influenced by Western education, there remains an assumption that whenever power increases in one it necessarily decreases in another. Because power is finite, to give it away is to lose it. While the influence of modernism and Christian missions have mitigated the effects of this worldview, animist assumptions remain strong. (Schatzburg, 1993) An African may freely use the word *empowerment* in relation to his subordinates. However, what is often meant is the enabling of followers to fulfill directives. His intention may be for them to develop and grow (consistent with servant leadership criteria) but as followers aligning themselves with his authority. In the absence of criticism or disagreement, empowerment (as a noble condescending benevolence) remains. However, when the leader perceives power rising in a junior who

challenges his direction, his power appears threatened. In the animist mindset the critical

finite resource of power is not easily given away.

> People see themselves engaged in constant struggles with spirits, other
> humans, and supernatural forces that surround them. In such a world,
> everything can be explained in terms of competing powers and power
> encounters in which the stronger dominate the weaker. (Hiebert, Shaw and
> Tienou, 1999, p. 84-85)

It is important to note that even a faithful leader operating under animist power

assumptions considers its loss a case of poor stewardship. The desire to keep the

influence capacity that has been entrusted to him by "the powers that be" (human, spirit

or divine) is considered an act of integrity. An autocratic style is preferred above the

possibility of losing power to a subordinate. Acknowledging the superiority of a

follower's ideas is considered weak and irresponsible. Self serving motives complicate

this dynamic yet the effects of these deeper assumptions about power are fundamental.

Servant Leadership Theory and the Nature of Empowerment

While recent attempts to promote a servant leadership model of management has

had increasingly successful results in the United States, similar efforts in South Africa

have fallen short. The connection of servant leadership with the indigenous values of

Ubuntu represents a significant breakthrough in the potential of servant leadership theory

throughout Africa.   However, further research must be conducted to study the ontology

of power in both countries so that dialogue concerning empowerment is not short

circuited by a cross-cultural semantic disjunct. A coherent inter-cultural philosophy of

power must undergird meaningful discussions of empowerment between the two cultures.

Those involved in Christian missionary education are particularly in a position to extend

biblical teaching into the fundamental elements of leadership.   The implications of the

gospel under-girding Greenleaf's understanding of power, authority, stewardship and

service are crucial to applying servant-leadership within the ubuntu paradigm.

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