

An Opponent-Process Model of Servant Leadership and a Typology of Leadership Styles*

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Abstract

The paper describes an opponent-process model, which helps explain the belief-behaviour gap of Christian leaders, who claim to be servant leaders, but practice autocratic leadership. The paper also presents a typology of four leadership styles: autocratic, paternalistic, Laissez-faire, and servant leadership. Of these four leadership styles, only servant leadership commands the necessary flexibility and the range of skills to be effective in different situations. Finally, the paper discusses the practical and research implications of the opponent-process model and the typology of leadership styles.

Introduction

Servant leadership (SL) is characterized by the desire to serve and empower followers and the belief that the best way to achieve organizational goals is through developing the potential of workers. The primary aim is service to others (Greenleaf, 1977). The idea of leaders and servants has gained increasing acceptance in the leadership and organizational literature e.g., (Covey, 1994; Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Laub, 2003; Russell & Stone, 2002; Wheatley, 1994).

Stone and Winston (2003) have appropriately referred to servant leadership as Theory S (<http://www.regent.edu/acad/schbus/cur/entr665-00fa/entr665-syllabus-00fa.htm>). This theory is clearly different from the three other theories (X, Y, Z) identified by McGregor (1967). Theory X views workers as basically lazy and need to be controlled. Theory Y views that workers are self-motivated and responsible and have an intrinsic interest in work. Theory Z attempts to incorporate both X and Y. In contrast, Theory S emphasizes the importance of leadership motivation and postulates that most workers will respond positively to leaders who seek to serve and empower them. Thus, servant leaders may be referred to as Type S leaders.

Many of the Fortune Magazine's annual 100 Best Companies to work for demonstrate the practicality and benefits of SL. Christians believe that SL is the best model of leadership for all situations, because it was practiced and mandated by Christ (Matthew 20:25-28; 23:11-12). It is easy to understand why SL to Christian organizations and works well in a spiritually oriented context (Millard, 1995; Winston, 2003).

However, there is increasing evidence of Christian leaders, who abuse rather than serve their followers (Enroth, 1992; Farnsworth, 1998; Johnson & VanVonderen, 1991). How do we explain this belief-behaviour gap? There are no easy answers. One plausible explanation is that some Christian leaders may have a misguided view of servant leadership. The following logic may be the basis for this misconception:

- They believe that they are chosen by God to lead the people; therefore, they have the right and responsibility to impose their authority on the people as directed by God.
- They are servants of God, but not servants of followers.
- They are accountable only to God, but not to the people.
- They do not want to be hindered in any way in enacting God's truth; therefore, they are justified to silence or remove those who question their decision.
- They do not want to share their power and authority, because that would weaken their effectiveness in doing God's will.

This line of thinking is based on theocracy and it can easily lead to abuse of authority, if the leader cannot be held accountable by others. Elsewhere (Wong & Page, 2003), we have identified the improper application of theology of theocracy as part of the problem, to the extent that it provides justification for ambitious, self-seeking leaders to lord over people in God's name.

A careful study of the theology of leadership will reveal that there are several biblical models of leadership, ranging from prophetic, patriarchic to shared (collective) leadership. It would be wrong for contemporary Christian leaders to assume the role of Moses, Elijah or King David, because Christ has given us a new revelation of leadership – we need to be suffering servants just as Christ has suffered for us.

Another misconception of servant leadership is that we have to give up powers in order to be servant leaders. We (Wong & Page, 2003) have pointed out that Type S leaders, like other types of leaders, make use of various sources of social power, but they have different preferences and practices.

Table I shows the first six bases of power proposed by French & Raven (2001), the next two provided by Hersey, Blanchard, & Natemeyer (2001), followed by Yukl's (1989) political power and Bass' (1998) inspirational and transformational power.

Table 1
The bases of social power

1. **Reward power** – Based on the leader's ability to reward workers.
2. **Coercive power** – Based on the leader's ability to induce compliance and conformity through manipulation and threats of punishment.
3. **Legitimate power** – Derived from cultural expectations, responsibility and authority associated with a leadership position.

4. **Referent power** – Derived from a worker’s desire to become identified and closely associated with the leader, because of relationship and the leader’s personality.
 5. **Expert Power** – Based on the knowledge and expertise attributed to the leader by followers.
 6. **Information power** – Based on the leader’s possession or access to valuable information.
 7. **Connection power** – Based on the leader’s “connection” with important and powerful persons inside and outside the organization.
 8. **Political power** – Based on the leader’s ability to maintain power and weaken the opposition through bureaucratic control and political maneuvers.
 9. **Inspirational power** – Based on a leader’s ability to inspire workers to embrace a shared vision and a higher purpose; to motivate them to do their very best
 10. **Transformational power** – Based on a leader’s ability to transform the culture, climate, and direction of the organization through the strength of his or her courage, integrity, character, and charisma.
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Experienced and effective Type S leaders would make use of all the above powers, however, they would much prefer inspirational and transformational powers that build up the workers. In contrast, autocratic self-seeking leaders would prefer coercive and political power that control subordinates.

Table 3 summarizes some of the differences between Type S leaders and autocratic leaders with respect to their use of powers, as reported in the literature.

Table 2

Differences between Type S leaders and autocratic self-seeking leaders

1. Different motives – Type S leaders use their power to **develop** followers; they build the company through developing the full potential of the workforce. Self-seeking leaders use their power to **control** the followers; they build the company through using or exploiting the workers.
2. Different preferences – Type S leaders prefer inspirational and transformational power, because they seek to **influence** and transform followers, while self-seeking leaders prefer positional, political and coercive powers, because to rule with unquestioned authority, they need to **control** subordinate.
3. Different outcomes – If we define power as the ability to influence followers, then SL is more efficacious, because the arm of control is short, while the reach of influence has no limits.

4. Different orientations – Type S leaders are sensitive to individual and situational needs, because they exist to serve others; therefore, they are **relation-oriented** and **situational**. Self-seeking leaders are only concerned about their own authority and power, and they demands blind obedience from everyone regards of individuals and situational needs; therefore, they are **task-oriented** and **directional**.
 5. Different levels of skills – SL requires a higher of leadership ability and skills, because it takes a lot of (a) interpersonal skills and (b) positive inner qualities to inspire and influence workers. However, authoritarian self seeking leaders only need two sets of very primitive skills to succeed: (a) demonstrate unquestionable loyalty and obedience to their bosses, and (2) to use coercive power to enforce obedience and conformity from their subordinates. Dwight D. Eisenhower once said: “You do not lead by hitting people over the head – that’s assault, not leadership.”
 6. Different attitudes towards vulnerability – Type S leaders are willing to risk making themselves vulnerable by trusting and empowering others, because some power-grabbers may exploit the situation to betray and attack Type S leaders. Self-seeking leaders, on the others hand, are afraid of vulnerability; that’s why they will do anything to hold on to power and keep others under control.
 7. Different attitudes towards humility – Type S leaders view themselves as servants and stewards; therefore, they voluntarily humble themselves in order to serve others. Self-seeking leaders, on the other hand, are only interested in feeding their own ego; therefore, they always blame others for failure and claim credit for success.
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The last two points set Type S leaders apart most clearly from autocratic leadership, because they are the defining characteristics of a suffering servant modeled after Christ as described in the Scriptures and the literature (Philipians 2: 6-8; Patterson, 2003; Winston, 2003).

The various differences listed in Table 2 are based on a larger literature (e.g., Lewin, 1951; Fleishman & Harris, 1962, Likert, 1961; McMahan, 1976; Stogdill & Coons, 1957; Yukl, 2002) that compares task-oriented, directive, and autocratic leadership and people-oriented, relational and empowering types of leadership. SL represents the latest development in the latter.

SL may be considered as an outgrowth of participative leadership (McMahan, 1976), which advocates empowerment and involvement of many members of the organizations. SL also shares some of the same characteristics as transformational leadership (Bass, 1998; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2003). For example, Bass (2000) points out that servant leadership is “close to the transformational components of inspiration and

individualized consideration” (p.33). SL is also similar to steward leadership (Block, 1993), because both emphasize the need to replace self-interest with service to others as the basis for using power.

Figure 1 presents a schema to integrate SL process with other people-oriented leadership styles

Figure 1
The Servant Leadership process

| Primary motivation | Primary responsibility | Structure | Process & Outcomes |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Serve and develop others | Be good stewards in all resources | Democratic flat hierarchy | Positive transformation of workers and company |
| <i>Servant Leadership</i> | <i>Steward Leadership</i> | <i>Participative Leadership</i> | <i>Transformational Leadership</i> |

The literature on these people-oriented and service-focused leadership practices has greatly expanded the long established findings on the importance of paying attention to relationships with employees (e.g., McMahon, 1976; Stogdill & Coons, 1957; Yukl, 2002.) Furthermore, there is now a clear consensus among modern management theorists (Avolio, 1999; Bennis, 1990; Hammer & Champy, 1993; Rinzler & Ray, 1993; Senge, 1990) that that autocratic leadership needs to be replaced by leadership that empowers workers. In a knowledge economy, the strong trend is towards flattening the hierarchy and empowering the knowledge workers.

These new developments in the leadership and management literature provide ample indirect support of the benefits of SL. More recently, the advantages of servant leadership over autocratic leadership have been well documented in the literature (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Laub, 2003; Page & Wong, 2000; Russell & Stone, 2002; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

Two kinds of insecurity that hinder SL:

Based on my interviews with various Christian leaders, fear of insecurity has often been cited as the main reason for leaders’ reluctance to embrace SL. It is helpful to differentiate between two types of insecurity:

1. Weakness-based insecurity – This stems from **fear of failure** because of a lack of confidence in one’s own competence. Inexperienced and incompetent leaders are easily threatened. They have difficulty accepting feedback and become very

defensive and insistent on their own ways, because they are too scared to expose their mistakes and weaknesses.

2. Power-based insecurity – This primarily stems from **fear of losing the power** to control others. Leaders suffering from this type of insecurity are not concerned about exposing their own mistakes and weaknesses, because they are totally blind to such matters. Instead, their main worry is that they may not have the necessary power to exercise control over their subordinates. Since it is difficult if not impossible to control others, authoritarian leaders will always feel insecure, regardless of how powerful they are.

Power-based insecure leaders tend to micro-manage every situation. They would inject them into even trivial matters, which are already regulated by established procedures and managed by competent people, simply because their need to reassure themselves that they have the power to impose their will on others and the things will go wrong without their intervention.

Of these two types of psychological insecurity, the latter is more serious, because weakness-based insecurity can be overcome with more experience and training, however, the power-based insecurity is difficult to cure, because the hunger for control is insatiable.

Another interesting observation is that a protégé may assert his power and turn on his mentor, even though he owes a great deal to his mentor for the promotion. In this case, insecure-based insecurity becomes power-based insecurity. Power is indeed a monster that recognizes neither teachers nor friends; it is blind, irrational, and it sustains itself by sucking other people's blood.

All through history, individuals in position of power have often abused their authority to oppress those with less power. The oppressed victims typically have three options: Fight, flight or Fright – a willingness to carry the burden of oppression. The majority of workers choose the last option, because it seems to be best strategy to survive in an oppressive work environment, but it will take a toll in terms of toxic emotional reactions and staff burnout (Rude, 2003).

A typology based on the opponent-process model

The opponent-process model is predicated on the interactions between two underlying opposing motivational forces: Serving others vs. self-seeking (Blanchard & Hodges, 2003). Thus, the model posits that SL is present to the extent that self-seeking is absent.

Since self-seeking cannot be completely eradicated, there will always be some internal conflict between the opposing motivations. Therefore, Type S leaders need to be vigilant, lest egotism suddenly raises its ugly head and undo much of the good that has been accomplished.

Self-seeking is characterized by power and pride, while SL is characterized by humility and self-denial. To put it in theological terms, the opponent-process model posits that SL can be implemented only to the extent that the flesh is replaced by the spirit of Christ, the Suffering Servant.

The **Servant Leadership Profile-Revised (SLP-R)** (Wong & Page, 2003) takes into account both the positive attributes of SL and the negative attributes of self-seeking leadership, because SL is present only to the extent that power and pride are absent. Based on the opponent-process model, we have developed a typology of leadership styles as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
A typology of leadership styles based on the opponent processes of serving others (SO) and self-seeking (SS)

| | | |
|--------------|--|--|
| <i>Hi SO</i> | Servant Leadership Caring, Empowering Situational (Best morale) | Paternalistic Leadership Protective, Directive Expecting loyalty (Second best) |
| <i>Lo SO</i> | Laissez-faire Leadership Detached, Weak Disinterested (Low morale) | Autocratic Leadership Coercive, Directive Demanding obedience (Worst morale) |
| <i>Lo SS</i> | | <i>Hi SS</i> |

Leadership style refers to “the relatively consistent pattern of behavior that characterizes a leader” (DuBrin, 1995, p.377). What sets servant leadership apart is that in addition to its service-oriented leadership style, it also practices situational leadership as described by Blanchard and Hodge (2003).

For example, Type S leaders will adopt practices associated with paternalistic leadership in situations where an immature and inexperienced workers requires a lot of handholding. Type S leaders may even resort to an autocratic practice, when a worker consistently acts irresponsibly. From time to time, Type S leaders will even fire employees, if they cannot perform the tasks they are hired to do, or engage in counterproductive behaviours.

Furthermore, Type S leaders may behave like a laissez fair leader by taking a hands-off approach in relating to a highly creative and self-motivated mature knowledge worker.

Clearly, for leaders to be effective, they need to move in and out of all four quadrants depicted in Figure 1, depending on the situation. Transformational leaders can be just as flexible and situational as Type S leaders. (Please read Stone, Russeel & Patterson, 2003 for a detailed comparison). However, regardless of what kinds of powers Type S leaders employ in a particular situation, they are set apart by the following cluster of self-less motivations and attitudes:

- They desire to serve and care for others
- They are committed to developing and empowering followers
- They are willing to sacrifice self-interest and suffer for others
- They put people first and value them more than organizational success

Even in the unpleasant situation of having to fire workers, Type S leaders will do so with compassion and care. For example, they may provide career counselling to help these workers develop a better work attitudes and find more suitable employments.

Typology and job satisfaction

SL is not only a highly humanistic and ethical leadership style, it is also predicted to be profitable because it increases morale, job satisfaction and productivity. The prediction of morale or job satisfaction as depicted in Figure 1 is based on the following reasoning:

The level of servant leadership, according to SLP-R, is that the servant leadership score equals to SO scores minus SS. Thus, the resulting SLP-R scores from the highest to the lowest will be as follows:

- 1st Servant Leadership = Hi SO – Lo SS
- 2nd Parental Leadership = Hi SO – Hi SS
- 3rd Laissez-faire Leadership = Lo SO – Lo SS
- 4th Autocratic Leadership = Lo SO – Hi SS

These hypotheses regarding the relationship between SL and morale, job satisfaction and productivity can be put to empirical test by using the SLP-R. Alternatively, the predictions can be tested by comparing the four different types of leadership styles based on other leadership measures, such as employees' descriptions of their bosses.

In order to better understand the psychological processes and dynamics involved in different types of leadership styles, Table 3 presents several relevant variables associated with each type of leadership style:

Table 3
Contrasting the four different leadership styles

| | AL | PL | LFL | SL |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Attributes of leader | Oppressive dictator | Benevolent dictator | Detached or weak leader | Empowering caring |
| Motive | Control | Loyalty | Disengagement | Developing workers |
| Power | Coercive | Reward | Hands-off | Inspiring |
| Effects | Fear | Dependence | Independence | Commitment |
| Best for | Irresponsible Defiant | Dependent Immature | Creative Mature | All types of workers |

AL = Autocratic leadership

PL = Paternalistic leadership

LFL = Laissez-faire leadership

SL = Servant leadership

Leadership styles and types of control

A major part of the responsibility of leaders is the exercise control to ensure that performance and production meet the expected goals and within budget. Another way to differentiate between servant leaders and self-seeking leaders is in terms of the differences in control tactics as shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Types of control associated with different leadership styles

| <u>Self-seeking leaders</u> | <u>Servant leaders</u> |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Command control | Ethical control |
| Behaviour control | Quality control |
| Mind control | Climate control |
| Information control | Accuracy control |
| Hierarchical control | Peer control |
| Political control | Procedure control |
| Bureaucratic control | Process control |

Although there are no empirical studies designed explicitly to compare types of control associated with servant leaders and self-seeking leaders, there is sufficient information from the management/literature literature to justify the above distinctions.

It is clear that the kinds of controls preferred by self-seeking leaders are motivated by the desire to control others in order to hold on to power. For example, political control may include such political tactics as “Divide and conquer”, “Character assassination”, and “Use false witnesses”. Information control usually includes: “One way communication from the leader to subordinates” and “Keep the workers in the dark so that they can not question the leader’s decision”. Mind control may include such tactics as: “Use informers to rat on employees you do not trust” and “Use HR managers to find out about employees’ beliefs and attitudes”.

In contrast, the types of control preferred by Type S leaders are designed to enhance productivity and maintain a positive climate. Such controls are professionally rather than politically motivated, because they have little to do with personal power and pride of the leader, but have everything to do with developing workers and growing the company.

The types of control employed by leaders can have either positive or negative effects on workers’ morale and productivity. For example, there is already a vast literature indicating that any control to limits individuals’ freedom of choice will result in psychological reactance. Future research the effects of various control tactics will provide a rich source of information on the differential impacts of Type S leaders and self-seeking leaders at the workplace.

Implementation of servant leadership

This paper has already shown that Type S leaders have different motivations and prefer different control tactics, but in workplace, how do they carry themselves? Are they concerned that a meek and humble demeanor may invite attack? Doesn’t familiarity breed contempt, if leaders fail to maintain certain personal space and positional boundaries? What will happen when subordinates take advantage of the kindness of their Type S leaders?

These are reasonable concerns. However, these problems are less likely to occur, when Type S leaders establish a relationship of trust and earn the respect because of their character, competence, compassion, depth of inner strength and a wealth of wisdom.

However, when people are used to authoritarian hierarchy, they may not know how to relate to Type S leaders. I can recall that in talking to a newly hired secretary, I told her about my practice of servant leadership, and encouraged her to be open with me: “Please let me know, whenever I unintentionally do something improper.” “Oh no, I can never do that,” she blurted out almost instinctively. Workers trained by authoritarian leaders seem to feel more comfortable simply taking orders.

Needless to say, Type S leaders have to develop a climate of trust and safety first. It would also be helpful to lay down some ground rules for this new way of management. Here are the guidelines for workers and leaders in a SL context:

- Both leaders and workers need to treat each other with respect and dignity as human beings.
- Both leaders and workers need to give each other honest feedback in a safe and trusting environment.
- Both leaders and workers need to be honest and truthful with each other, because without trust, it is difficult to work together.
- Workers are entitled to know what direction the company is going, and why, but they are not entitled to know all the information leading to that direction.
- In the event when there is the need for a drastic change of direction, which seriously affects the workers, it is important to inform and consult the workers first.
- Leaders are not under any obligation to explain their every decision, but when their decisions have a direct negative impact on the workers, they really need to justify them.
- Both leaders and workers need to put aside their ego and selfish agenda in order to implement SL successfully

Personality types and SL

Although leaders with different kinds of personality and temperament can acquire the servant leadership style, some personalities are more compatible with the SL style than others. For example, individuals who are very generous, compassionate and interested in helping others are more likely to be attracted to SL than those who are very authoritarian and egotistic. The relationship between personality type and SL remains a fruitful area of research.

It is interesting to note that SL can be associated with both Type A and Type B personalities.

- Type A SL – The intense, impatient, competitive extroverted type, who appears to be aggressive and domineering, but really has a heart for people.
- Type B SL – The gentle, humble and introverted, L5 leader, who is tender-hearted but tough-minded.

The advantages of SL

It is proposed the SL may indeed qualify as one best leadership style for all situations for the following reasons:

1. Being freed from egotistic concerns, such as insecurity and self-advancement, Type S leaders are able to devote their full attention to developing workers and building the organization.
2. Type S leaders have a positive view of workers as individuals who are capable of developing their full potentials and becoming leaders, if they are given a supportive and caring work environment.
3. Being concerned with individual needs and sensitive to individual differences in personality, Type S leaders are able to bring out the best in the workers.
4. Being situational leaders, Type S leaders recognize situations in which absence of their power actually facilitates self-management and productivity.
5. Being good stewards, Type S leaders will do whatever necessary and appropriate to maximize leadership effectiveness in all kinds of situations.
6. Being worker-centered and growth-oriented, Type S leaders can turn ordinary workers into future leaders.
7. SL serves as an antidote to corruptions and abuses in high places.
8. SL can help reduce burnout and build an emotionally healthy organization.
9. SL focuses on cultivating the intrinsic motivation through inspiring workers to believe in their own growth and in the vision and purpose of the organization.
10. SL seems most suitable for the next generation of workers, who are very cynical of authority and demand authenticity in their bosses.
11. SL seems most suitable for knowledge workers, who value independence and creativity.
12. SL recognizes that leadership is a group process, which should not be centralized in one or two individuals.
13. SL is based on humane, spiritual and ethical values.
14. SL represents the most effective and comprehensive approach to human resources management and development.

The limitations of SL

1. Inexperienced leaders feeling very insecure may not be able to implement SL, because they are afraid of losing their ability to lead or losing their position.

2. It involves high risks, because by adopting a humanistic and empowering approach, it may provide an opening for some unscrupulous, scheming and ambitious individuals to exploit the situation for selfish gains.
3. It is not possible to implement SL in an entrenched authoritarian hierarchy, according to the opponent-process model.
4. It is difficult to implement SL unless senior management have undergone a personal transformation and are totally committed to SL.
5. It is difficult to implement SL in the military. For example, command-and-control leadership is needed on the battlefield, where following the orders of a commanding officer is essential to survival in a rapidly changing and dangerous combat situation.

Benefits of the opponent-process model

1. It explains and predicts the absence and presence of SL.
2. It points out the need to confront and address the destructive attributes of egotistic pride and authoritarian power.
3. It identifies the two defining attributes of SL – intentional vulnerability and voluntary humility
4. It provides a helpful typology of leadership styles and explains why SL is superior to other leadership styles.
5. It identifies the deficiencies of self-seeking leaders.
6. It explains the failure of SL in organizations, which profess to endorse it.
7. It explains the belief-behaviour gaps in leaders and organizations.
8. It provides a reasonable explanation as to why there should be a positive correlation between the Servant Leadership Profile – Revised and job satisfaction.
9. It incorporates three lines of leadership research: conceptual, empirical and practical.

Conclusion

This paper has sketched a broad roadmap for theoretical development and systematic research of SL. It is hope that the opponent-process model and the typology of leadership styles described here will generate considerable research in order to advance the understanding and applications of SL.

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