

# Servant Leadership and Spirituality at Workplace: A Critical Review

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## Abstract

The term 'spirituality' is most debating concept across religions over the ages, on the lines of spirituality, a new synthesis so called as workplace spirituality aroused to debate on the differing views of religion, contemporary business and leadership styles across industries. These views of religion and leadership styles on spirituality paved a way for further acknowledgement of servant leadership propounded by Robert K. Greenleaf (1977) which primarily focuses on love, trust, honesty, interpersonal acceptance leading to followers' job attitudes, performance, and organizational outcomes: the fundamental outcomes of 'spirituality at workplace'. This paper throws light on the influential factors and effectiveness of servant leadership in visualizing 'spirituality at workplace' in a holistic perspective keeping in view of followers' attitudes, organizational performance through self-encouraged and committed servant leaders of the organization and concluding with the benefits and path to 'spirituality at workplace' across the organization by encouraging spirituality through so called 'servant leaders.'

**Keywords:** Leadership, Culture, Servant Leadership, Spirituality, Workplace

## Introduction

Many organizations are keeping up their momentum to be competitive by focused cost-cutting strategies right from downsizing to optimum utilization of resources for maximized productivity by fulfilling employees. Some organizations being successful, were not fully unleashing the capability of their workforce. Garcia-Zamor (2003) argued that employees are in search for meaning of their presence in the work, through personal and community

fulfilment. This cultural transformation, workplace spirituality exemplifies organizational practices and embraces workforce their minds, bodies and spirits to work.

The need of the hour for the present corporates is to experience a new angle of enriched workplace culture with honesty, trust, creativity, personal fulfilment and improvised commitment of employees to organizational goals (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002); this provides a path to focus on spirituality at workplace. The term 'spirituality' being a multidimensional in one's thought, divinity, religious affiliation cannot affirm a standalone way for the organization to follow by keeping away the employee's innate understanding of spirituality (Guillory, 2001; Mohamed et al., 2004). In another perspective, spirituality is all about understanding and knowing the meaning and purpose of doing work.

It is the responsibility of the business leaders to display the importance of spirituality at workplace for understanding the essence of one's contribution towards the fulfilment of organizational goals. To accomplish this, the leaders must foresee the organizational transformation in terms of readiness to change by encouraging differing views on spirituality from organizational members, and providing a platform for smooth execution of planned organizational spirituality. As (Fry, Matherly, & Whittington, 2007) these challenges improve organizational effectiveness by focusing more on employee well-being; giving rise to stable workplace spirituality. Fairholm (2000) professed a need for spiritual leadership as leaders seeking meaning and resemblance with their inner life and that leadership style was actually servant leadership. So, the leader must possess certain innate traits of a 'servant leader' (Greenleaf, 1977) viz. emotional healing, empowering putting subordinates first (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, &

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Henderson, 2004), wisdom, altruistic calling (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), service to others, integrity, hope (Sendjaya & Sarros 2002), listening (Dennis & Winston, 2003) for proper implementation of workplace spirituality.

## **Spirituality at Workplace**

Spirituality at workplace has been studied at length by many organizations and researchers, this is because corporates experiencing many barriers from mental health to social life of employees; stress to resignation; traditional change rather than organizational learning; leading to obscured transformation in organizational culture (Mohamed et al., 2004). Schein (1999) argues that, to achieve organizational effectiveness, it is very important to understand the role of culture in the organization.

In spite of increased popularity of spirituality in workplace, very little research was carried over because of its non-material nature; differing thoughts and beliefs across religions, nations; to provide a concrete base/platform for the organization to implement and undergo transformation.

Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) defined spirituality is one's innate feeling on beliefs and values, and Bruce (1996) defined spirituality on religious view as set of beliefs and actions driven by supernatural and impersonal powers for a moral purpose, and existential view of spirituality by Burack (1999) throws light on the meaning, purpose and the existence of employees in an organization.

By understanding one's importance at workplace will reduce worker alienation, employee frustration; as there is an adequate understanding of existence and at the later stage increases the productivity (Naylor, Willimon, & Osterberg, 1996). This requires employees to realize their utmost potential through learning and development by gaining self-knowledge (Herman, 2008). This unleashes the hurdles and improves the understanding of their purpose in the organization.

Guillory (2001) says that organization's vision should derive a workplace community through shared personal values in alignment with organization's values. With this alignment of values, employees feel connected with one another within the organizational culture, thus making meaning and purpose of work and workplace community

fully interweaved. Another important theme is that having urged for serving others, makes employees feel more contributing than working for themselves; giving rise to a meaning of live (Herman, 2008).

Workplace spirituality can be emphasized on certain core elements from providing meaning, purpose and community; operating on alignment of personal to organizational values; by assisting through urge to serve others; towards optimal human development.

## **Workplace Spirituality on Employee and Organizational Performance**

Spirituality at workplace on employee motivation increases spiritual energy; enabling valuable organizational contributions; creating humanistic work environment (Herman, 2008). As organizational culture and spirituality at workplace are intertwined to create an increased meaningfulness of work; discovery of purpose and personal fulfilment; organizational commitment increases as there exist an understanding of beliefs and values among employees showing a strong sense of organizational community.

A newer perspective of organizational performance can be visualized by aligning intangible items like beliefs, values, organizational culture and goals; as an outcome of effectiveness. Creating a humanistic work environment improvises employee morale (Garcia-Zamor, 2003), human development, ethical conduct (Gull & Doh, 2004), honesty and trust; improving individual performance leading to organizational excellence by achieving enterprise growth, stability and ultimately profitability.

## **Servant Leadership**

Robert Greenleaf (1977) in his seminal work stated that servant leader has a natural feeling to serve others than to be served, creating opportunities for the growth of followers (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Spears (1995) characterized servant leader as a person with adorable qualities like listening, being empathetic, having healing touch; awareness about the surroundings, persuasive, conceptualization, foreseeing outcomes, stewardship, commitment to the spiritual growth of others; and building community. Laub (1999) designated the characteristics of

servant leader as providing direction by empowering and developing people, humility, interpersonal acceptance, authenticity and stewardship.

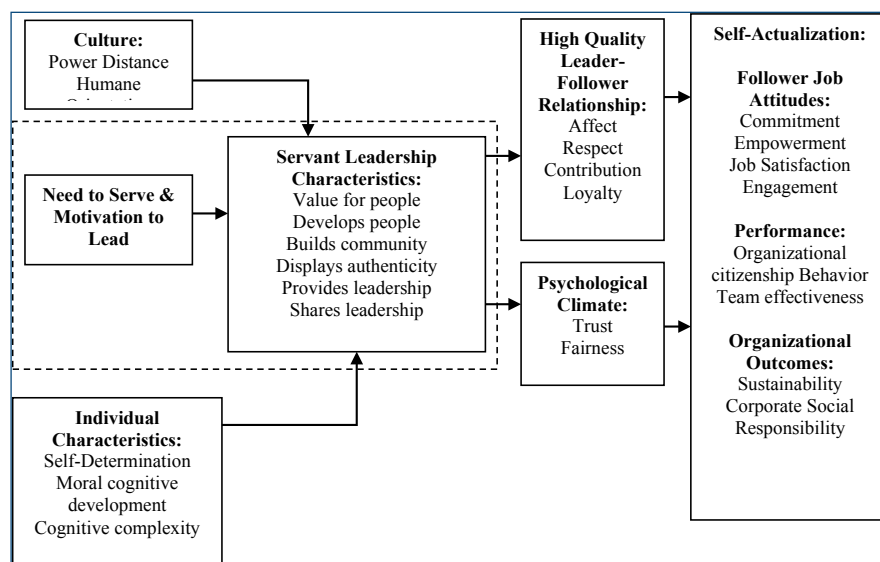
Dierendonck (2011) emphasized that servant leadership is focused on motivation to lead with a need to serve, which influences and builds a healthy working environment on individual front – leading to increased individual performance; enhanced team performance which leads to an increased organizational sustainability. This will help the organizations to attract, create trust, integrity, and make employees understand the purpose of their stay in the organization for mutual benefit – work & life, and life & family.

Whereas, Yukl (2010) contributed through his research that spirituality is one of the potential factors to hone servant leadership; which was not clearly dimensioned in earlier

studies. The term spirituality being a multidimensional in thought and practice, values the beliefs and rituals of variant religions.

Servant leaders; being transformational leaders provides opportunities to develop peers, followers to greater heights of ability and potential; concerning on certain invaluable asserts like ethics, standards and values (Bass & Avolio, 1994). As the ideology ‘to serve’ was presumed only for non-profit organization, later the concept is been implemented across high valued corporates whose priority is not just to serve but also to generate profits.

Servant leaders build community by partnering with workers within their organizations (Herman, 2008). Greenleaf (1998) on servant leadership said that there exists an utmost difficult task to create harmonious, trustworthy and organizational community within organization by means of synergy.



**Fig. 1: Antecedents and Consequences of Servant Leadership**

The servant leader foresees the organizational future and takes on clarifying goals, unleashing the hurdles of past, focusing on present and moving forward for facing the future consequences (Spears, 2005); creating a strategic vision for organizational sustainability in the long-term perspective (Banutu-Gomez, 2004). Thus, servant leadership; a follower-centric focused build trust and credibility in the workplace.

It is evident from Biblical foundations that the concept of Servant Leader, was personified by Jesus Christ in Matthew 20:25-28 (NIV):

<sup>25</sup>But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup>Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. <sup>27</sup>And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave – <sup>28</sup>just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

The above scripture clearly notifies to mankind that it is the fundamental duty of the leader not to head for

exercising the authority or power. Being, Son of God by Himself, Christ Jesus never felt to exercise the power but to serve the need with His compassionate love and merciful grace to the mankind, that He just accomplished His duty, by instructing the leaders to serve first than to be a leader.

This provides a firm foundation of paradigm shift in organizational leadership in terms of servant leadership.

## Servant Leadership and Workplace Spirituality

Spirituality at workplace enhances understanding the meaning of work and one's purpose in the organization. This makes the servant leaders of organization to focus more on its innate qualities like value creation, building community, providing direction, creating a shared platform for building trust, humility, showing agape love among employees. The purpose of workplace spirituality is not just to understand the purpose of one's stay in the organization, but by serving others make their association with the organization holistic. By serving others creates a remarkable improvement in the commitment of leaders as well as the followers in terms of learning and growth to form a power house for the organization.

Empowerment and shared leadership are two major attributes of servant leadership which unlock the barriers and opens up the hidden and creative energies of the employees. This potential development among the employees (followers) creates a dignified atmosphere where morals, values and ethics are the core elements for its success.

The servant-led organizations making their mark in attracting, keeping and retaining employees in the present profit-led market place (Herman, 2008). Servant leadership produces spiritual generative culture; focusing more on personal and team growth with improvised interpersonal work relation; giving rise for caring institutions.

Finally, the inclusion of spiritual element into the workplace through the perspective of serving others makes servant leadership a successful driving force for spirituality at workplace.

## Conclusion

World, being borderless global village, it is evident that workforce diversity is being followed extensively across corporates worldwide. Freeman (2011) argues that empowering others can happen by understanding one's emotions, activities and giving value for their beliefs; as the origin and destiny of two persons is not the same. With the commitment towards the spiritual growth among others, servant leadership (Kriger & Hanson, 1999) focus more on trust, humility, love, service to others; termed as spiritual values; drives organizations spiritually oriented.

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