

Servant Leadership and Psychological Ownership: Curtailing Resistance to Change

Puja Khatri¹, Sumedha Dutta²

¹Is currently working as a Professor at University School of Management Studies, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi.

²Is presently working as an Assistant Professor with Maharaja Agrasen Institute of Management Studies, Delhi. She is Research Scholar at University School of Management Studies, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi.

Abstract: Servant leadership's deep current of implication has swayed attention of scholars globally, creating an apt environment for Greenleaf's leadership style to flourish. Significant findings of numerous scholars highlight the significant role played by servant leadership in organizational context. However, the concept is impinged due to lack of its universally accepted definition and measures. Noticeably missing from research attention is the effect of servant leadership in promoting psychological ownership among employees. Work of prominent experts is pooled through a wide – ranging literature review to study various convergent and divergent ranges of the principal constructs. Relevant literature is explored to examine a servant leader's role in instilling and facilitating psychological ownership feeling among employees. Moreover, an attempt to determine whether feelings of psychological ownership inculcated through a servant leader helps in reducing employees' resistance to change is also made; since in present times change has become an omnipresent feature in organizational context.

Keywords –Positive Psychology; Psychological Ownership; Servant Leadership; Resistance to Change.

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I. Introduction

In the present times, VUCA – volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, has been widely accepted as an omnipresent feature of working in the Indian industry (Nasscom: The IT-BPM sector in India, Strategic Review, 2015). Drastic changes on all fronts coupled with rapidly increasing demands of customers have offered numerous challenges and opportunities to the entrepreneurs. Along with this, there has been an increase in profit organizations and not – for profit organizations. In these organizations, autocratic and hierarchical models of leadership find no place. These traditional models have been replaced by one standing on synergy in team and community, one that emphasizes on involving others in making decisions, one resting on moral and caring behaviour, and one making efforts towards augmenting the individual development of employees while recuperating our institution's quality. Such a promising approach where leadership and service go hand – in – hand is labelled as servant leadership. Now in its fifth decade, servant leadership as a style goes on to make a silent revolution in organizations across the borders. Greenleaf's initial writing on 'servant leadership' has assisted the beginning of this movement, and his vision has had an increasing reflective impact on many.

II. Research Methodology

Numerous online databases have been extensively searched to search for available literature in journals of repute to gather articles related to servant leadership, psychological ownership resistance to change and their individual associations with other pertinent constructs. Online databases like EBSCO host, Questia, Emerald Management, Taylor and Francis Online, Elsevier's Business and Google Scholar were explored to collect significant work linked to our area of interest. To produce quality work, care was taken to access repeatedly used online databases in the area of leadership and organizational behaviour. An attempt has been made to include recent work in the field of servant leadership, psychological ownership and resistance to change so that fresh aspects can be associated with our present work demonstrating the dawn of the stated constructs. The definitions and dimensions of all the stated constructs extended by numerous scholars are examined to present a comprehensive view of the studies undertaken in the selected area. Further, the potential benefits of these constructs in organizational context are also explored. Towards the end, the researchers drew conclusion and identified the future direction in which the role of the selected constructs can be studied.

III. Literature Review

Conceptualizing Servant Leadership

When two seemingly contradictory terms, servant and leader, are brought together, turbulence at the surface is bound to occur. The reason for this disorder is on account of the way the people were managed earlier. The onset of industrial revolution brought the age of mass production as well as the age wherein the exploitation of employees was considered as a regular practice. However, the wheels of time have brought a shift in this long – held view. Undoubtedly, a rapid shift in standard practices toward the ideology espoused by numerous scholars, such as R. K. Greenleaf, Stephen Covey, Peter Senge, Max DePree, Margaret Wheatley, Ken Blanchard, etc, clearly indicate existence of an improved approach to manage and lead our organizations.

In 1970, Robert K. Greenleaf concocted the term servant leadership in his essay entitled *The Servant as Leader*. His rich experience of 40 years in working to shape large institutions helped him to embark upon this novel idea. However, the idea of servant as leader dawned upon Greenleaf on reading *Journey to the East* by Herman Hesse. The novel portrayed a mythical journey by a group of men on a spiritual quest. Leo, the main character of the story, accompanies the band as their servant performing menial tasks and also safeguarding them with his enthusiasm and spirit. The journey gets disbanded in the middle as Leo disappears abruptly. Towards the end, the narrator discovers that Leo, who was seen as a servant was in reality the ostensible head of the Order. Thus, we have a leader working like a servant to selflessly serve the needs of his people. This story makes Greenleaf visualize about a leadership style that could help in making a better, more caring society. And thus, the concept ‘servant leadership’ was born. In Greenleaf’s opinion a true leader is one whose prime concern is a profound wish to facilitate others. Thus, a servant leader is one who is at the outset seen as a servant to others and such a simple fact is central to his/her greatness.

In his essay, ‘*The servant as Leader*’, Greenleaf wrote “*It begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant – first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served.*”

Greenleaf’s novel style of leadership captured the attention of numerous other scholars. Hall (1991) explains servant leader as a person “who invests himself or herself in enabling others, in helping them be and do their best” (Hall, 1991). Patterson (2003) states that servant leaders are those “who lead an organization by focussing on their followers, such that the followers are the primary concern and the organizational concerns are peripheral.” To quote Northouse (2004), a servant leader is one who has “a strong altruistic ethical overtone which emphasizes leaders being attentive to the concerns of the followers; they should take care of them and nurture them and in return they will take care of the leaders.” Stone *et al* (2004) explains servant leadership as a belief that focuses on the growth, development and holistic well being of employees and thus, contributes towards meeting of organizational goals on a long term basis. In the opinion of Perry & Mankin (2007), the main focus of a servant leader is to solidify relations of trust within organizational hierarchy. Lussier & Achua (2007) as cited in Carder 2012, define servant leadership as a style which surpasses invested interest and aims to serve work towards fulfilment of other’s needs by assisting them to prosper at personal as well as professional level.

Attributes and Effectiveness of Servant Leadership

Presently, we don’t have a single model or a well established definition of servant leadership, but numerous conceptual models and measurement instruments of servant leadership have been proposed by researchers based on their own understanding of Greenleaf’s writings. The base for establishing an effective work on servant leadership should rest on the major tenets presented by Greenleaf (1970, 1972) and Larry Spears (1995, 2002), since they were the initial advocates of this theory. Listening, empathy, healing, persuasion, awareness, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people and building community, are some of the traits extracted by Larry Spears (1998) from Greenleaf’s writings (1977). However, Spears (1998, p.6) stated, “*these ten characteristics of servant leadership are by no means exhaustive*”.

Barbuto & Wheeler (2006) proposed a framework consisting of emotional healing, altruistic calling, persuasive mapping, wisdom and organizational stewardship as attributes of servant leadership. Sendjaya, Sarros & Santora (2008) recognized six traits of a servant leader, namely, authentic self, transcendent spirituality, voluntary subordination, responsible morality, covenantal relationship, and transforming influence. The dimensions suggested by Barbuto & Wheeler have been used in this study.

Table 1.1 – Servant Leaders’ Attributes (here)

A servant leader on the basis of trust, value and relationship building creates a healthy and sound organizational culture (Sarkus, 1996). Servant leaders on account of their reliability and commitment earn employees support (Greenleaf, 1998). Patterson & Winston (2003) observed a higher level of commitment among followers led by a servant leader; while, Dury (2004) reported a negative correlation between servant

leadership and organizational commitment. Irving (2006) observed a strong association between team effectiveness and servant leadership at individual level. Reinke's (2004) empirical study showed that servant leadership style establishes trust within the organization as well as towards the leader. The cross cultural applicability of servant leadership has been studied by Sarayrah (2004). Ehrhart (2004) studied the effect of servant leadership on Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB). The same relationship was also examined by Vondey (2010) indicating that servant leadership significantly but partially correlates with OCB.

Positive Psychology and Psychological Ownership

In 1998, Martin Seligman's Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association paved way for a promising branch of psychology called 'positive psychology'. The aim of positive psychology is to shift the lens of psychology from identifying human flaws, deficiencies or mental illness to building positive qualities in human (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In other words, Positive Psychology studies such competencies and resources or focuses on what is 'right' about people, their strengths, psychological assets and positive traits. It lays focus on the situations and courses supporting most favourable working of people, groups and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

Over the past 15 years, since its inception, the role of various constructs of positive psychology in workplace has been studied by numerous scholars. The multitude of research in the field of positive psychology indicates a higher level of productivity, safety at workplace, employee engagement and overall happiness (Turner, Barling & Zacharator, 2002). Hope, optimism and resilience influences employees' job performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and work happiness (Youssef & Luthans, 2007). A positive psychological climate helps teams to bounce from adversity and doesn't allow them to fall into the trap of critical and self – absorbed advocacy (Froman, 2010). Positive psychology encourages maintenance of positive moods in the workplace which further leads to an increase in employees' productivity (Rana, 2015).

One constructs of positive psychology that has in recent time established as a promising psychological resource, gathering attention of researchers, is psychological ownership. Psychological ownership meets Positive Organizational Behaviour (POB) criteria since it rests on theory and research, is open to change and development, can be measured, and influences the workplace performance (Avey, Avolio, Crossley & Luthans, 2009).

Psychological ownership refers to employees' subjective interpretation and assessment of their agreement with the organization (Rousseau, 1996; 2001; Turnley & Feldman, 1998). One can develop a feeling of ownership towards both material and immaterial objects. Moreover, this feeling forms identity (Belk, 1998; Dittmar, 1992) and also influences behaviour (Isaacs, 1933, O'Toole, 1979). Initially, legal ownership was solely viewed as a factor leading to psychological ownership (Pierce, Kostova & Dirks, 1991; Wagner, Parker & Christiansen, 2003). However, existence of psychological ownership even in the absence of legal ownership was asserted by Pierce *et al.*, 2001, 2003. They defined psychological ownership as a "state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of it is 'theirs' (that is, it is MINE)".

Beggan (1992) stated that people assess ideas and objects in a positive light when they experience a feeling of ownership towards the targeted object. Thus, psychological ownership results in a formation of positive attitude towards an object (Nuttin, 1987). While studying the relationship of psychological ownership with servant leadership and employees' resistance to change the above stated stance is followed in the present work.

Avey *et al.*, 2009 identified two distinct forms of psychological ownership – promotion and prevention. In Kark & Van Dijk's (2007) opinion "individuals who operate primarily within the promotion focus are more concerned with accomplishments and aspirations and show more willingness to take risks," whereas "individuals who operate primarily within the prevention focus are more concerned with duties and obligations and experience emotions of anxiety and agitation." The four theory - driven components comprising promotion – oriented psychological ownership are sense of belonging, accountability, self identity and self – efficacy, whereas territoriality serves as the only component of a prevention – oriented psychological ownership.

Figure 1.1 (here) Dimensions of Psychological Ownership

Resistance to Change

The present competitive business environment forces companies to unendingly hunt for means of improving their products/services (Andriopoulos, 2001). Improvement is a must for organizations on account of many developments taking place in the internal as well as external environment of the organization, such as new leaders are engaged, stifling competition, increasing expectations of customers, etc. On account of this array of developments, organizations cannot afford to remain static. Introducing change can be an extremely arduous, time – consuming process, especially in a large organization. Most people do not enjoy change

(Manning & Curtis, 2012, pg. 360). In certain situations people can exhibit reluctance to accept change and will fight to preserve the status quo.

Implementation of an organization wide IT system calls for certain structural and cultural changes engulfing the entire organization. However, momentous change disrupts our expectations set for the future which is seen as a loss of control (Marshall & Conner, 1996). Consequently, the reaction is resistance to change. People are generally not willing to alter the manner/style/technique they have been (fruitfully) using, especially when they are unaware about the purpose of the complete procedure and who will be benefitted from the changes (Doppler and Lauterburg, 2000). Thus, often the source of resistance is uncertainty and fear of the unknown.

Folger & Skarlicki (1999, pp.25) claim that "organizational change can generate scepticism and resistance in employees, making it sometimes difficult or impossible to implement organizational improvements". In their view, resistance is viewed as "employee behavior that seeks to challenge, disrupt, or invert prevailing assumptions, discourses, and power relations" (p. 36).

Servant Leadership, Psychological Ownership, and Resistance to Change

The researchers believe that a servant leader's main focus, concern for people's well being, has the potential to inculcate a feeling of psychological ownership among employees and this would play an effective role in managing employees' resistance to change. A servant leader's humility and stewardship has the potential to increase the occurrence of desirable behaviours among employees which leads to effective functioning of an organization (Organ, 1988).

Servant leaders consistently make efforts to empower, create trust, display accountability and ethics while serving the followers (Page & Wong, 2000; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden Wayne Zhao & Henderson, 2008; Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011), and such efforts would cast their influence on employees to experience ownership feelings for the organization. Specifically, since servant leaders serve by setting an example for others to follow (Tureman, 2013), we can postulate that employees would be motivated to make efforts for improving the functioning of an organization since a feeling of psychological ownership feeling towards their organization is developed among them. Servant leaders attract followers and their behaviour is keenly observed and liable to be replicated (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Avey *et al* (2009) state that an individual's self identity, self – efficacy, sense of belongingness and accountability culminate in establishing psychological ownership feeling's among employees. Thus, a servant leader has the potential to manifest feelings of psychological ownership in employees.

Once a feeling of ownership towards an organization is developed among employees, that is the organization becomes 'theirs', making improvements in the working of an organization is seen in a positive light. In other words, owing to feelings of psychological ownership employees become receptive towards bringing about change in an organization and resistance to change is thus, curtailed.

McShane, (2010) stated that the team involved in implementing change must be guided by "five C's" – cooperating, coordinating, communicating, comforting and conflict resolving (pp. 243-244). The above stated behaviours require humility and supporting and understating others, all of which are considered as well established practices to servant leaders. A servant leader on account of their reliability and commitment earn employees support (Greenleaf, 1998) which would make the employees positive towards accepting organizational changes. Kotter (1996) stated that implementation of change requires establishing trust and necessity of change being made by organization in the mind of employees. Building such an outlook among employees "can be done by openly talking about the change and the vision behind it" (Kotter, 1996, pp. 66); and these traits of openness and communicating vision are well identified with a servant leader (Russell, 2001). Empowering the employees is considered as an essential aspect of introducing change in a workplace; and this aspect can be accomplished very well by a servant leader (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006).

We propose that a servant leader's altruistic concern for people's well being has the potential to inculcate a feeling of psychological ownership among employees and this would trigger a chain of effects that lowers employees' resistance to change.

Figure 1.2: Conceptual model linking servant leadership, psychological ownership and employees' resistance to change (here)

Research Implications

Servant leadership earned wide spread attention in the popular press, however, availability of mainly anecdotal evidence failed to give its due fame (Bowman, 1997). An attempt has been made to present the applicability of servant leadership in organizational context with an aim to bridge this research gap. Specifically, the paper demonstrates how a servant leader can be effective in making employees receptive towards

organizational change. To stimulate thinking, the present work offers a servant leadership model assimilating the dimensions presented by Barbuto & Wheeler (2006), along with its linkage with psychological ownership and resistance to change in an organizational context. This conceptualization is an attempt to contribute to theory building of servant leadership, psychological ownership and resistance to change as well as making substantial contribution to management practice.

The work is the first attempt in which a methodical study of the relationship between servant leadership, psychological ownership and resistance to in organizational context has been discussed. The research paper holds importance since the literature in published domain related to servant leadership continues to be in its embryonic phase. The gamut of literature, offered in the work will supply a lucid course to the prospect researchers aiming to practise their study in this promising and unexplored field of study. The article would offer a practical framework for improving effective functioning of organizations and would also assist in enriching the organizational behaviour literature. The model presented in this study would guide the organizational stakeholders to appreciate yet a supplementary significant management approach for influencing employees' performance and smooth working of organizational processes.

Future Directions

The cursory examination of the presented variables calls for more empirical research. The researchers propose to empirically establish the relationship among the stated variables in the second phase of their research work. The literature presents various areas where there exists opportunities to initiate empirical literature stream for servant leadership and psychological ownership. Through this work, an attempt has been made to motivate other researchers interested in the area of leadership and positive psychology to join in the empirical research required to uphold this stream of literature to the next level of maturation.

IV. Conclusion

Slowly but certainly, Greenleaf's writings on servant leadership continuous to leave a strong, enduring influence on educators, leaders and many more who are concerned with issues pertaining to management, leadership, personal growth and service. A servant leader's genuine concern and commitment to employees' empowerment, welfare, involvement in decision making and overall growth of organization makes it a promising organizational phenomenon to spark off a feeling of psychological ownership among employees towards the organization being served. Servant leader's ardour towards overall development of an organization will surely channelize the employees' efforts also in the same direction and thus, implementing a change for organizations' betterment will become an easy task. Specifically, the article proposes that servant leadership would encourage employees to view the organization in which they work "as their own", leading to numerous positive work outcomes, one being reducing employees' resistance to change. Leading change while serving others is incalculably demanding; but for those who can do it, its rewards and effectiveness is beyond expectations. Undoubtedly, servant leadership is being widely acknowledged as a long – term transformational approach to work life which has the potential to cultivate positive change all over our society.

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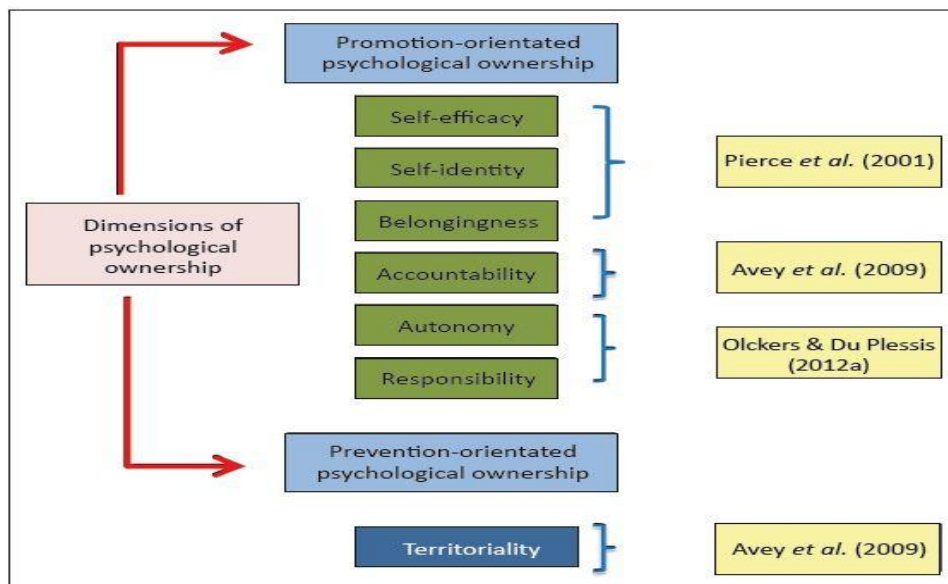
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Table 1.1 – Servant Leaders’ Attributes

Year	Author	Dimensions
1991	Graham	Inspirational, Moral
1997	Greenleaf	Vision, Low need for power, Humility, Empathy & Communication skills
1998	Buchen	Capacity for Reciprocity, Self-identity, Preoccupation with the future, Relationship Building.
1998	Larry Spears	Empathy, Listening, Awareness, Healing, Persuasion, Foresight, Conceptualization, Stewardship, Commitment to the peoples’ growth and Building Community.
1999	Farling, Stone, A.G. & Winston, B.E.	Influence, Vision, Trust, Credibility and Service
1999	Laub	Developing people, Valuing People, Displaying Authenticity, Building Community, Sharing Leadership and Providing Leadership.
2001	Russell	Credibility, Vision, Service, Trust, Pioneering, Modeling, Empowerment and Appreciating Others.
2003	Patterson	Humility, Agapao love, Altruistic, Visionary, Trusting, serving & empowering
2006	Barbuto & Wheeler	Agapao love, Humility, Altruistic, Visionary, Trusting, Serving & Empowering
2008	Sendjaya, Sarros & Santora	Voluntary subordination, Authentic self, Responsible morality, Covenantal relationship, Transforming influence and Transcendent spirituality.

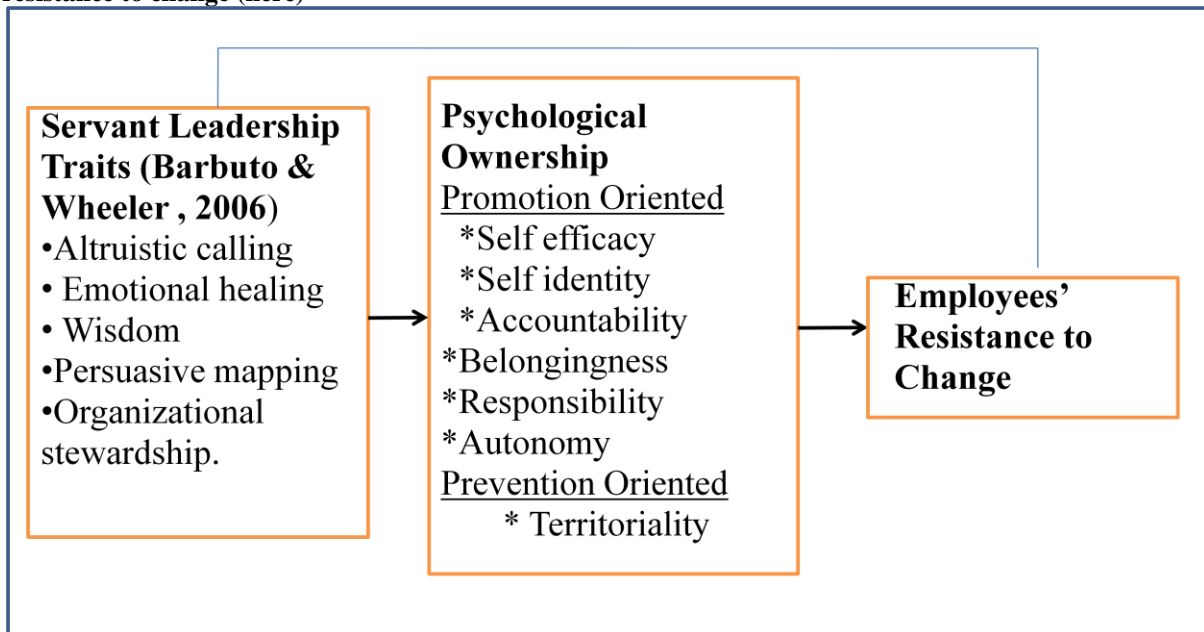
Figure 1.1 (here) Dimensions of Psychological Ownership



Source: Olckers, C., & Du Plessis, Y. (2012a). Psychological ownership: A managerial construct for talent retention and organisational effectiveness. *African Journal of Business Management*, 6(7), 2585–2596

FIGURE 1: Theoretical dimensions of psychological ownership.

Figure 1.2: Conceptual model linking servant leadership, psychological ownership and employees' resistance to change (here)



Source: Author's own

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