

What Kind of Character is Ethical? Servant Leadership as a Unifying Ethical Concept
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Abstract

This paper considers a supplementary approach to traditional ethics education as a means for developing ethical organizations. After noting some of the limitations of traditional ethics education, it presents a character-based ethic that can be taught in organizations. That ethic is centered in the practice of servant leadership. The advantages and potential problems of using servant leadership as a basic organizational ethic are examined.

Introduction

Ethical failures in business have continued to fuel a trend toward the development of strong ethical training in business and education. The call for strengthening ethics education comes from government organizations, from educators and from the business world. There seems to be agreement that we need to do a better job of teaching ethics. It is not difficult to see why. A productive free market system requires some level of trust. Investors who cannot trust that they can know and understand the profit potential of a business will not be inclined to invest. Customers who cannot trust products will not be inclined to buy. Employees who cannot trust their bosses will be less inclined to give their all to the work of the business. Unethical behavior undermines business productivity. In a highly competitive global environment, that can be deadly.

The problem with the argument for increasing ethics education, however, is the basic question of whether or not ethics education has any value in actually making people ethical. Most business schools have been teaching ethics for quite a while. Stark (1993) noted that 90% of the nation's business schools had some kind of ethical training. There were also three

academic journals dedicated to the topic of business ethics and at least 16 research centers in operation. All of that was in place before the loudly publicized ethical failures of the last ten years. It is possible, of course, that some involved in major ethical lapses were not exposed to ethics education, but it is more likely that many, if not most, were. The problem does not seem to be with the amount of ethics education so much as with the effectiveness of it. However, even if some ethical failures come from those with good ethics education, that does not invalidate ethics education. Hartmann (1998) notes that students do not always learn or apply principles from other subject areas effectively. Management principles, for instance, only really matter to those who want to work effectively in organizations. Managers often fail to apply the principles of management in the work setting. Yet, we do not suggest that there is no point in teaching management principles because of the failures. Similarly, Hartmann argues, we cannot afford to stop teaching ethical principles simply because a few do not listen.

Character ethicists have long argued that the primary goal of ethics education should be developing people of good character rather than attempting to solve impossible case studies. Unfortunately, they have not generally been able to offer a character ethic that seems to work well in the business environment. Attempting to apply a philosophically developed, individualistically-oriented and often vague character approach to the business world has proven challenging. The partial solution I want to offer comes not so much from the field of ethics as from the practice of leadership. My thesis in this paper is that the practice of servant leadership provides a basis for ethics that can help to develop more ethical behavior in the business environment. Servant leadership can be taught to students as a significant part of ethics education and can also be developed in organizations as a way to improve the ethical climate of the business. To demonstrate the thesis, I will begin with a look at some of the problems inherent in traditional ethics education. Next, I will consider both the value and the limitations of character

ethics approaches, leading to an organizationally-oriented approach centered in servant leadership. I will then consider the areas where servant leadership fits well as an organizational approach to developing character. There are, of course, some limitations of the approach that need to be considered. Finally, I will introduce some areas where further study might contribute some insight into this approach.

The Problem of Business Ethics Education

Ethics education often has two primary facets. First, students are introduced to several approaches to attacking an ethical question. While various books might consider anywhere from two to ten different systems, the three approaches that are most commonly considered are rules, consequences and character. These approaches are then applied to numerous dilemmas to consider how they might work. While this approach can provide the opportunity to think about ethical struggles, it has some problems. First, it is rooted in a moral philosophy that may not apply well to the self-interested world of business. Second, it is usually highly individualistic and misses the corporate nature of business ethical choices. Third, there is a tendency to turn ethical considerations into a consumer market, where students can pick and choose among various perspectives with no real danger that there is a right answer they might miss.

Business ethics is usually based on the general moral philosophy that has dominated the broad study of ethics. That philosophical background is rich and valuable as a starting point for ethical discussion, but it also has weaknesses when applied to specific business issues. Stark (1993) noted that business ethics discussions have suffered from the problem of being too general, too theoretical and too impractical. If a business ethicist wants to address questions like “is capitalism morally justifiable?” students and managers alike are likely to consider the question useless. Business students are also likely to consider everything else the ethicist says

with skepticism. This can lead to the ethics classes seeming irrelevant compared to the hard data oriented classes in accounting, finance and economics. For business ethics to work, it has to have some traction in a world dominated by self-interest, mixed motives and difficult balances.

Ethical study has also generally focused on how individuals make good decisions. Even with business ethics cases, the cases tend to assume that an individual is attempting to make a decision in a specific case without any consideration of the corporate environment. Rost has argued that most concepts of ethics relate to acting ethically in relation to another person or small group. The ethical approaches give little help in dealing with the problems of the corporation (Rost, 1995).

Rost proposed a framework that could be used to evaluate the value of a corporate approach to ethics. This framework provides a way of evaluating whether an approach to ethics accomplishes what is needed to create ethical corporations. There are five elements in Rost's framework (Rost, p. 139-140):

- 1) Have a large group orientation.
- 2) Be oriented toward process
- 3) Be oriented toward producing a virtuous organization, not just virtuous individuals
- 4) Develop a clear understanding of the common good and how people promote it (Note: Rost admits this is going to be very difficult in a pluralistic society)
- 5) Needs to be genderless and transcend religious boundaries

I will return to these criteria after discussing servant leadership's ethical orientation to see if servant leadership can begin to answer some of the concerns cited.

The third problem with typical ethics education is that the dilemma-based systems tend to turn students into consumers who feel they can choose whatever they consider most important.

Lantos argued that the moral dilemma approach tends to teach students that what is right or wrong is simply a matter of personal preference (Lantos, 2002). Lantos is not alone in that view. In a speech at Baylor several years ago, Stanley Hauerwas commented “Students love these kinds of games because they realize that the results are no threat for their own lives.” Teaching students to think through difficult choices is certainly a necessary goal, but the character ethicists’ critique that moral choices will not generally come from immoral character is an important one. In fact, we run the risk of simply teaching how to rationalize immoral decisions if moral character development is not a significant part of ethics training.

On the other hand, the dilemma-based approach can be an effective means of helping students to think about the kind of character they want to have. For instance, Hartmann (2006) notes the value of presenting students with examples of how the negative pressures of organizational culture can lead to poor ethical decisions. One classic example of the misuse of authority was the Milgram experiment where individuals were told to apply shock treatments to subjects who gave wrong answers in a quiz. Many of those tested were willing to give apparently dangerous levels of shock because they were being told to do so by an authority figure. Hartmann notes, however, that few people who know of the experiment would be very obedient if they were subjects in a rerun of it. Presenting students with cases where authority was misused or organizational power tended to corrupt individual ethical decision should provide students with good reasons not to fall prey to similar traps when they get into the corporate world. Hartmann argues that this means that we can provide people with the ability to recognize ethical issues and consider the kind of persons they want to be before they actually face the situation in the real world.

Servant Leadership as a Character Ethics Paradigm

Character or virtue ethics tends to focus on the idea that ethical behavior generally comes out of ethical people. If we want to develop industry leaders who act ethically, we need to develop people with good character. If a corporation wants to see ethical behavior from its employees, it needs to have virtuous people working in the organization. Even more to the point, the organization itself needs to have a virtuous orientation. Character-based ethics approaches can be rather subjective and obscure, but they also provide the best opportunity to develop people who act out of good motives. An even more important strength of character ethics, from a business perspective, is that it has a learning component. The organization can emphasize the continual growth of the person (or the organization) by developing motivational dispositions (Whetstone, 2001).

Both Lantos and Hauerwas offer ethical approaches based in character ethics, but neither seems to me to be wholly satisfying as an approach to ethics in the corporate world. Lantos argues that we should develop people who seek to emulate God's character. That character includes the holiness, justice and love that Alexander Hill (1997) emphasizes, as well as the virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, faith, hope and love. While I would certainly advocate (and currently practice) teaching Christian business students to develop such character, I am less convinced that such an ethic can be taught in most corporate environments. Even a corporation that considers itself to be "Christian" is still limited in how much it can (or even should) insist that its employees project values that are distinctly Christian.

Hauerwas has long been a critic of traditional ethics education. He has consistently objected to any approach that implies that decisions about ethics can be made without first creating a moral character capable of making those decisions. His basic view of character ethics

is rooted in two primary concepts: the church as a social ethic and non-violence (Hauerwas, 1983). Hauerwas has remained intentionally vague about how his concept of the church as a social ethic would work in terms of making difficult decisions in the world—even in terms of developing an individualistic ethic. He seems to see that vagueness as necessary, but it makes the idea of developing his view corporately almost impossible. With his emphasis that ethics must arise from a specific community (in his case the church), it is highly unlikely he would want to apply it to any kind of secular organization anyway. He is much clearer about the importance of non-violence, but that, too, is problematic in the business world. Even as a personal ethic, there are problems with the idea of non-violence as the centerpiece of a Christian ethic. It focuses too much on a few select statements of Jesus while ignoring much of what happens in the rest of scripture. It also runs the danger of seeing Jesus as too soft and weak to have any relevance in the corporate world. Molyneaux's (2003) treatment of the concept of "meekness" provides an excellent example of a better approach to Jesus' basic message. He argues that Jesus' concept of meekness is best represented by the well-trained war horse. The horse is powerful, yet thoroughly under control. Its value lies in the combination of its strength and ferocity with its willingness to be controlled by its rider. Jesus could, therefore, enter the city of Jerusalem "meekly," but immediately go to the temple and drive out the money changers without any apparent conflict. Servant leadership represents that view of "strength under control" much better than the idea of non-violence does.

The strength of servant leadership as an ethical approach is that while it can be a personal approach to leadership, it can also be a system that is taught to an entire organization. It can be taught to students as individuals, but it can also become the defining method of establishing leadership throughout an organization. As the concept has become more popular, many

corporations have done exactly that. Companies like Synovus Financial, TD Industries, Nordstroms and Southwest Airlines have systematic approaches to developing servant leaders throughout their organizations. They have generally done so to develop leaders rather than to create an ethical environment. Nevertheless, it remains true that these companies have shown that servant leadership can be taught as an organizational concept.

If servant leadership is primarily about leadership technique, though, can it also be an ethical system? A look at the fundamental concepts of servant leadership shows that it can. Greenleaf (1977) defined the servant leader as “servant first.” More importantly, he developed a rather clear “acid test” of servant leadership that reveals the strong ethical nature of the practice: “Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And will the least privileged in society benefit or not be further deprived?” A servant leader’s first concern is with the growth of others, not with self. That basic concept would go a long way toward developing more ethical leadership. Greenleaf’s final element in the definition sets a strong standard for societal impact. In terms of developing an effective corporate ethic, the effect on society is probably the area where servant leadership seems least likely to help. Yet, if Greenleaf’s test were the standard, even considerations like impact on the environment and community must be considered in making decisions.

The advocates of servant leadership argue that leadership begins with character. Blanchard and Hodges (2005) argue that leaders must first overcome their ego’s desire to be served and learn to focus on serving others. They contend that a heart motivated by self-interest cannot be the heart of an effective leader. Autry (2001) describes character as the foundation of good leadership. A person must practice authenticity, vulnerability and love for others in order to

lead others. Hunter (2004) argues that leadership is a skill that is learned by first developing a character that is based in moral maturity and commitment to doing the right thing. What these and other servant leadership advocates all emphasize is that leadership is much more about the kind of person one is than it is about techniques and practices. The primary consideration here is that the character aspects that make up a servant leader are things that will make for more ethical behavior. Hunter describes the character of a servant leader as patient, kind, humble, respectful, selfless, forgiving, honest and committed. In sum, Hunter argues that the love described in I Corinthians 13 is the very basis of leadership. One idea that I have borrowed from Hunter illustrates this well. When I begin teaching leadership, I ask students about the characteristics of a great leader that they have known personally. I then write those characteristics down and save them. Later when I talk about Hunter's idea that love is the basis of leadership, I show how closely their terms match up with Hunter's description of love. There are seldom more than two or three traits that do not match up perfectly with the eight character traits Hunter describes.

In discussions of leadership, the Machiavellian question often comes up "is it better to be respected or loved?" While I would have to answer that a leader needs to be respected more than she needs to be loved, I also argue that this is the wrong question. First and foremost, a leader needs to love her followers. If leaders practice love, they will exemplify the character that will make people want to follow them. Of course, all this talk of love and character sounds mushy. Whetstone (2002) indicates that servant leadership is often described as unrealistic because it is seen as soft and failing to recognize our "will to power." It is also threatening to some who have gained power in a hierarchical structure. In a similar vein, Giampetro-Meyer et al. (1998) note that servant leaders are seen as not being aggressive, not willing to articulate a vision, and not striving for short run profits. It is certainly true that this image of servant leadership may make

many in corporations hesitant to implement such an approach, but the image is incorrect (except, hopefully, for the idea that servant leaders will not strive for short run profits). Most of the problem centers in the poor understanding many people have of love as a soft feeling. Hunter (2004) makes it clear that loving someone does not mean failing to hold them accountable. In fact, it is unloving to fail to hold someone accountable to the standards of excellence that a company has set. Servant leaders can and should be aggressive, but they will be aggressive about the right things: protecting the values of the company, defining a clear vision, keeping employees focused on living up to the standards of the organization, etc. Collins (2001) makes a similar argument in his description of what he calls Level 5 leaders. He notes that great leaders are a mix of humility and intense personal will. Although Collins avoids the term “servant leader” (primarily because of concerns that it is seen as weakness), his picture of great leaders is of those who care about the organization and not themselves, but who also have a total commitment to maintain high discipline standards within the organization.

The very qualities that make a person an effective servant leader define a character that should make ethical decisions. A leader whose first goal is to seek to grow those they lead as workers and as human beings is going to have to think first about someone other than himself. We are not looking just for an individual ethic, however, so the more important question is whether servant leadership can work as an organizational ethical system. To consider this, I return to Rost’s framework. First, an organizational ethic needs to have a large group orientation. Servant leadership has been shown to work in that way. Hunter (2004) noted that approximately one-third of the *Fortune* magazine “100 Best Companies to Work For” list were involved in developing servant leadership as a core operating principle of the company. Even though those corporations were more interested in leadership style than in ethics, they have demonstrated that

the approach can be developed institutionally. Second, Rost argues that the approach must be oriented toward process. This seems to be the weakest point for servant leadership. Rost appears to be looking for a systematic approach to decision making that can be followed in a step-by-step format. Servant leadership often rejects systematic approaches and expects people to act out of good character. Nordstroms, for instance, has been known for telling employees “act according to your best judgment.” However, I would argue that this is also the weakest of Rost’s points in the framework. I am not convinced that an ethical process is the best way to ethical conduct. Processes can easily be directed toward a self-serving goal. They also do not fit the way that most people make decisions. Even though I generally teach students a simple process for ethical decision making, I am convinced that most people will come to ethical conclusions primarily by the direction of gut instinct. The advantage of servant leadership is that the practice of the disciplines of servant leadership should help to develop better gut instincts.

Rost’s third principle is that the approach must develop a virtuous organization, not just virtuous individuals. It seems likely that an organization controlled by those seeking to put others first would be more likely to be virtuous in its decisions toward outsiders. In fact, one of the primary selling points of the servant leadership model has been the effective customer care and support that is generated by the organizations that practice it. Servant leadership organizations are known for treating customers well. Fourth, Rost argues that the approach should develop a clear understanding of the common good and how people promote it. This is not an easy commitment in a pluralistic society. Servant leadership clearly does seem to have a picture of the common good. It involves the need to help other people develop into the best they can be. If Greenleaf’s test is used, it also involves seeking to improve the situation of even the most disadvantaged in society. That would seem to represent a picture of the common good from

within the organization. It is not clear whether Rost believes the approach needs to develop a picture of the common good that even those outside the organization would buy. That seems unlikely, however, since our society has pretty well conceded the impossibility of a universal understanding of what is best for society.

Finally, Rost argues that the approach needs to be genderless and transcend religious boundaries. As an approach to leadership or to ethics, servant leadership simply makes no reference to gender. It is not clear that servant leadership organizations are better at being color and gender blind than other organizations, but their goal of developing and growing all people should lead that way. The modern servant leadership movement does have strong roots in Christian thinking. Robert Greenleaf was a Quaker who desired to develop a thorough ‘theology of institutions.’ Many of those who are leading advocates of servant leadership are also Christians, including Blanchard, Hunter, Autry and Depree. Many writers use Jesus as a model of servant leadership. On the other hand, servant leadership does not require adherence to a particular religious belief. An organization can hold people accountable to principles of love, patience and honesty without referencing the scriptures. I might like to argue that Christians should be “better” at being servant leaders because of the extra motivation of seeking to obey Christ, but I would have to recognize that many without faith reflect good character in their lifestyle. Even if the upper management of a corporation were motivated to follow servant leadership primarily because of faith, they still could encourage the practice without having to advocate a particular faith approach.

The character that is required for servant leadership, therefore, represents a solid foundation for ethical behavior within an organization. Those who seek first to grow and care for others should tend to make ethical choices—especially since most unethical choices are going to

be heavily rooted in self-interest. Servant leadership also has the ability to serve two functions. It can be taught to individual students as a foundation for character that will enable them to resist negative corporate pressures. It can also be taught to organizations to make both the organization and the individuals within the organization more ethical.

Weaknesses and Issues

The most obvious question that seems to be raised by this argument is whether servant leadership would only really help with the ethical treatment of employees without really changing the nature of how an organization deals with the rest of society. As one of my graduate students put it, if an Exxon employee decides to serve the corporation by doing something that will damage the environment and hurt the people of Ecuador, would he not still be practicing servant leadership? Servant leadership should be effective in developing an organization that will make good choices in relation to employees and even toward customers and stockholders, but will that make the corporation a good corporate citizen? It only will if the last line of Greenleaf's test is kept as part of the standards of leadership. It is not enough to simply seek to grow one's followers. For servant leadership to be a complete ethical approach, the idea of "caring for the least of society" must remain part of it. That may not always be the case, since that extension by Greenleaf is the least rewarding to the organization in terms of creating a more profitable company.

It also will do no real good for a company to simply say that it wants to be a servant leadership corporation. Just as a long value statement that adorns the wall of the employee break room but has no impact on the decision making of employees is of little worth, a hollow commitment to servant leadership will not impact the ethical environment of the company. For a company to develop a positive organizational character through servant leadership, it must make

serving part of the way that employees are evaluated. The old adage that “what gets measured gets done” is unlikely to go away in organizations. Corporations that claim servant leadership, and even those who sincerely want to practice it, but who do not implement means to evaluate the practice are unlikely to gain much from the process. Hunter (2004) has developed a 360 degree-style leadership skills inventory that can be used to evaluate the practice of servant leadership. The inventory involves evaluation by superiors, peers and direct reports along with a personal evaluation. That inventory is followed by an action plan on the part of the employee to address weaknesses in developing servant character. Without some form of measurement that is tied into the compensation and promotion structure of the organization, it is unlikely that genuine servant leadership will take root in an organization.

A critique of servant leadership by Eicher-Catt (2005) raises another potential issue with servant leadership. Eicher-Catt criticizes the servant leadership model as a myth that fails to live up to what it claims. In a detailed language analysis, she argues that the juxtaposition of the words servant and leadership fail to create a gender-neutral concept. Her argument is founded in the idea that the ideas of service have feminine characteristics and the ideas of leadership have masculine ones. In an environment in which senior managers are often male and lower-level managers are often female, she argues that the organizational chain of command could enact “leadership” roles while encouraging lower management staff to exhibit more “servant” characteristics. Thus, servant leadership could become a means to seek submission on the part of others, especially the feminine. I would argue that Eicher-Catt has significantly misconstrued servant leadership. Top management that is doing what she describes is clearly not practicing servant leadership. The very idea of servant leadership focuses on the idea of being “servant first.” That would have to begin at the top or it would have no impact. Nevertheless, I do think

she points to a concern for which we need to pay special attention. Any leadership or management technique, if it is used solely as a technique, has the potential to be nothing more than manipulation. For servant leadership to be effective as an approach to organizational ethics, it must be genuinely practiced from the top down. It cannot be just a tool used by management to get more work from employees.

One final concern relates to something that is also a strength of the concept. I argued that a corporation could endorse servant leadership without requiring any kind of faith commitment. As a broad approach to developing ethical behavior that is a good thing. On the other hand, from a Christian perspective, it has problems. There is always danger in applying Christian perspectives in non-sectarian ways. I find myself uncomfortable with the modern spirituality movement because it seems to be trying to be religious without being specifically Christian (or anything else, for that matter).

Beadles (2000) argues that a significant problem with the idea of servant leadership is that it fails to be distinctly Christian. He argues that there is nothing in the theory that would prevent those who reject the Bible as authority from considering the theory helpful. However, Porter's (200) response to Beadles is right on target. There are many things that Christians embrace that others do as well. That does not disqualify the idea from being biblical or Christian. I believe the fundamental problem here is that we need to consider whether something is "essentially" Christian rather than whether it is "distinctly" Christian. We do not have a problem just because those of other faiths can agree with our perspective on an issue. We do have a problem when we accept a perspective because it sounds good without fully testing its legitimacy against the scriptures. We also have a problem if we come to see the individual practice as being what Christian practice is all about, rather than seeing it as only a part of the Christian message.

In this regard, servant leadership has a solid foundation in Christian practices. Historically, that approach seems to water down Christianity more than it provides a neutral basis for “Christlike” behavior. Christians implementing servant leadership in a secular environment should be careful about implying that the practice makes someone “spiritual” even if they do not actually have a commitment to Christ. Just as prayer in schools, obeying the Ten Commandments, and praying to a generic God do not make a person a Christian, neither does the practice of servant leadership.

Areas for Further Study

A key area of study that this argument opens is an attempt to evaluate the actual effect servant leadership is having on the ethical climate of organizations. I would suggest that an ethical evaluation of three types of companies might be helpful. The first group would be organizations without any commitment to servant leadership. The second would be companies that claim to practice servant leadership but have nothing in their organizational structure or reward system that actually encourages the practice. The third group would be companies that intentionally train servant leaders and then hold people accountable to doing the behavior. If my argument is correct, I would expect the third group of companies to be the most consistently ethical. My guess is that the second group may actually be worse than the first – depending on whether some of the first group might have commitments to strong moral values based on some other approach. It would be necessary to control for the presence of other forms of ethics education or ethical commitment within the companies.

Another area of interest would be the question of how difficult it is to transform an existing organization into a servant leadership organization. Most of the companies that are highly committed to servant leadership began their existence that way. How difficult would it be

to change the culture of the company in order to create both better leadership and better ethical behavior? This concern grows out of the comments by Whetstone (2002) that servant leadership may be threatening to those higher in the power structure of a company. A company that has been based on older models may find those who have fought their way up a hierarchical ladder to be resistant to change. The argument that servant leadership would make the company more ethical may not prove to be effective with those people, but the argument that servant leadership can create better companies with people who are more committed to the vision of the company may have a better opportunity to sway them.

Conclusion

I have argued that the paradigm of servant leadership is more than just a solid approach to leadership. It provides a systematic approach to character development that should enable organizations to improve the character of their people and the overall virtue of the organization. Employees who learn to make choices based on what is best for others should be better suited to make ethical choices in situations where self-interest conflicts with the right thing to do. Christian realism would still note that people are not going to be perfect, but servant leadership should be the basis for a character ethic that makes for better organizations.

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