

Servant- Leadership

Dr. Barbara Tey & Seow Mei Ling



Is servant-leadership a paradoxical misnomer? How can one be a leader and yet a servant at the same time? Can this type of leadership be successful in the 21st century? Peter Sheldrake, Professor of Business Entrepreneurship at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, sheds some light on the servant leader's role in contemporary corporate settings.

It is not everyday that one gets to speak to a practising servant leader who is also a leading authority on the subject in this part of the world. A postgraduate session facilitated by Professor Sheldrake in Kuala Lumpur enabled a timely meeting with the Australia-based educator. Witty and affable, Professor Sheldrake spoke avidly on a topic close to his heart - servant-leadership in today's organisational context. Some of the key areas discussed are presented in the following text.

What is servant-leadership? What are the distinguishing characteristics of a servant leader?

Prof. Sheldrake: A servant leader is someone who is authorised by others to lead, not someone who leads by virtue of their position. Most servant leaders become leaders because people respect them, and they respect them because they always put the other persons' interests first, not their own. In other words, they serve other people, and as a result, people see them as ideal leaders.

In what way is servant-leadership important or beneficial? What are the implications of servant-leadership in organisations today?

Prof. Sheldrake: Servant-leadership is very important in modern organisations for two reasons:

- The old command and control version of leadership does not work well in a knowledge economy where it is people's knowledge and skills that matter, and harnessing these.
- Servant-leadership works well with younger people who do not want to be told what to do, but want to be able to participate in decision-making, analysing situations and exploring options.

What factors promote or retard servant-leadership practice in organisations?

Prof. Sheldrake: Traditional hierarchical organisations find the servant-leadership approach hard to deal with - they see leadership as a function of position. People who are very achievement oriented are also unwilling to support or use a servant-leadership approach - they are much too driven by their own needs.

Servant-leadership works well in networked organisations where people work on projects, and where skills and capabilities are respected more than position.

What are the main criticisms and greatest misconceptions on servant-leadership?

Prof. Sheldrake: Some people feel that servant-leadership is

too focused on what individuals want, and not on what the organisation wants - although this is wrong. Servant leaders are very good at understanding other people and at helping [people] contribute to the organisation and its goals, and yet do so in a way which helps meet [the people's] needs as well. Servant leaders do work for the organisation but they manage their role with a great deal of sensitivity and subtlety.

Do you think servant leaders are a rare breed? Is servant-leadership a paradox, even an anachronism, in today's corporate world?

Prof. Sheldrake: Servant leaders exist in most organisations. They are the people you go and talk to when you want to explore a difficult or confidential issue. They tend to be in a minority, and often don't make to the top of the organisation because they are not driven to achieve for themselves. However, some organisations recognise their importance, and some CEOs are servant leaders (e.g. at Visa and at HP in the past).

Who would you say epitomise servant-leadership today?

Prof. Sheldrake: The funny thing about servant leaders is that, because of their approach, they don't stand out. My favourite example was the CEO of Colgate Palmolive for about 20 years until 2001. He never used the word "I" once and yet built his company up extremely successfully over that time.

Do you foresee servant-leadership playing a major role in the Asian corporate community in the near future?

Prof. Sheldrake: Yes, as more Asian companies move into the web-world and are more networked with other organisations, these types of new leadership styles will become increasingly important, and servant leaders will emerge. Some must be there already - in waiting.

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SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Are servant leaders born or made? Can anyone become a servant leader?

Prof. Sheldrake: Like all things in leadership, it is not an “either/or” issue. Leadership capabilities are partly there in the young person, and partly the result of organisational experiences. We all have the capability to be more reflective and sensitive to others, and that capability can be enhanced by the jobs we have, or diminished. It is hard to grow servant leaders in hierarchical, authoritarian cultures - but even there, some people persist. It is a matter of both genes and experience.

Since experience contributes to the making of a servant leader, does this imply that aspiring servant leaders can be developed through training programmes, whether formal or informal?

Prof. Sheldrake: Development programmes - rather than training programmes can always help. People can practise new skills, and be put into developmental positions which will emphasise and grow their servant-leadership skills.

How is servant-leadership related to other forms of leadership? Is servant-leadership a separate genre or

is it complementary to other leadership styles?

Prof. Sheldrake: Servant-leadership is not a style - it is much more than that. It is about fundamental beliefs about yourself, about other people, and about values. Servant leaders respect other people, and see leadership as a matter of working together to achieve outcomes.

Since servant-leadership is not a style but more than that, would it imply that one can, for example, be a charismatic leader, or even an authoritarian one, and a servant leader at the same time?

Prof. Sheldrake: By their nature, servant leaders tend to be more participative and less authoritarian. It may be possible to be charismatic and a servant leader - but that means true charisma, that is, people who inspire others by their behaviour; and in the case of servant leaders, this means servant leaders like the sister who worked with the poor in Calcutta [sic] - leadership that inspires through quiet example, not through public relations skills!

What are the current areas of research in servant-leadership?

Prof. Sheldrake: This area was given a great impetus by Jim Collins in looking

at “great” companies, where he found that the leaders of really exceptional companies were what he called “level 5 leaders”. In our terminology, these are servant leaders, and his work (in *Good to Great*) has sparked off a great deal of research on two topics:

- How you can spot a servant leader
- How you can support them.

Is servant-leadership currently, or soon to be, incorporated in the business school syllabus?

Prof. Sheldrake: Servant-leadership has been explored in leadership programmes in many universities - it is certainly in the curriculum at RMIT, especially in our Master’s in Business Leadership.

Beyond business school syllabus, how do we put servant-leadership into practice in the local corporate community which tends to be traditional and hierarchical in nature?

Prof. Sheldrake: By example and by patience. Sun Tzu once said that we should beware of stars that shine brightly, burst into the sky, and then disappear soon afterwards. Rather, we want the leader who works with the group and who enables their progress, so that at the end of the project, they say “Look at what we have achieved”. Sun Tzu was very wise - good leadership comes from thinking “we”. □



Professor Peter Sheldrake is the Professor of Business Entrepreneurship at RMIT University in Australia. He is well known in the local management scene having been involved with the Malaysian Institute of Management in various educational programmes including the MBA (International Management) and the Bachelor of Business in Business Administration Executive. A frequent traveller to Malaysia and other countries in the region, Professor Sheldrake is well versed with Asian culture having written several books such as Ronin and Revolutionaries and The Ronin Age.