

A Structure for Utilizing Multicultural Principles to Strengthen the Servant Leadership Approach

Heather Gentry

As a current leader in a diverse public education setting, possessing a comprehensive understanding of multiple leadership styles and approaches is of the utmost importance. When embarking upon the task of investigating the concept of leadership, one can locate numerous leadership theories, approaches, and practices that can be referenced by an abundance of articles or texts. However, a component that is noticeably absent from the majority of these elements relates to the associations that exist for each theory, approach, or practice in relation to the multicultural world in which we live today. Through the integration of leadership concepts from multicultural communities into an existing leadership approach, we are able to create a stronger, more sustainable approach to leadership that will be applicable in our multicultural world.

To accomplish this objective, three principles from the text, *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit: Leadership for a Multicultural Age* (Bordas, 2012), will be utilized to strengthen the popular leadership approach of servant leadership. Bordas asserted, “A multicultural leadership orientation incorporates many cultural perspectives, appreciates differences,

values unique contributions of diverse groups, and promotes learning from many orientations” (p. 8). The three multicultural leadership principles from the text that directly strengthen the servant leadership approach are (a) Principle 5, Leaders as Guardians of Public Values; (b) Principle 6, Leaders as Community Stewards; and (c) Principle 9, Gracias.

Northouse (2016) stated, “Servant leadership is a paradox—an approach to leadership that runs counter to common sense” (p. 225). Servant leadership is an approach that appears contradictory to the traditional Western view of leadership. Greenleaf (1970) defined servant leadership by stating:

[Servant leadership] begins with the 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. The best test... is: do those served grow as persons; do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not further be deprived? (p. 15)

This approach is one that resonates throughout the principles discussed in the Bordas (2012) text. Principle 5, Leaders as Guardians of Public Values, contains components that directly relate to the approach of servant leadership. According to Bordas, “Leadership in communities of color is inherently a public responsibility to bring people together to address and change the social and economic conditions that affect their lives” (p. 102). This principle

cites the oppression of minorities, specifically African Americans, as a reason this responsibility exists.

Principle 6, Leaders as Community Stewards, is another principle with direct ties to servant leadership. In fact, Bordas (2012) made multiple references to servant leadership within her text. Bordas asserted, “Servant leadership is deeply anchored in Black, American Indian, and Latino cultures that center on community responsibility, the public welfare, and addressing the social structures that hinder people’s progress” (p. 121).

An additional principle, which links directly to servant leadership, is Principle 9, Gracias. This principle references spiritual responsibility as the principle’s driving force. This spiritual responsibility ties directly into the goal of servant leadership to help others. Bordas’ (2012) thoughts on spirituality connected to servant leadership when she declared, “Spirituality is a moral obligation to ensure others’ well-being and the collective good” (p. 182).

In order to explicate how these three principles fit into the servant leadership approach, as well as how they strengthen this approach in relation to multicultural leadership, the concepts in these principles will be connected to the servant leadership approach through a focus on the seven servant leader behaviors delineated in the text, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, by Peter Northouse (2016). According to Northouse, “Collectively these behaviors are the central focus of servant leadership. Individually, each behavior makes a unique contribution” (p. 233). Focusing on the behaviors listed in this approach is an advantageous method,

due to the fact that behaviors are an element that every leader can conceptualize and attempt to emulate in their own leadership styles. Through this focus on behaviors, a framework for implementation will be created.

The first behavior discussed in relation to servant leadership is the behavior of conceptualizing. Northouse (2016) declared:

Conceptualizing refers to the servant leader’s thorough understanding of the organization—its purposes, complexities, and mission. This capacity allows servant leaders to think through multifaceted problems, to know if something is going wrong, and to address problems creatively in accordance with the overall goals of the organization. (p. 233)

This behavior directly relates to the Native American concept explained in Principle 6, It Takes as Long as it Takes. Bordas (2012) quoted a Native American in his text to clarify this principle:

John Echohawk observes, ‘I am usually quiet and spend a great amount of time listening and watching. I really want to know what other people think about an issue before I offer my opinion. I have been told that sometimes I am not seen as a leader in these situations. In the Anglo community, a leader takes charge and makes his ideas known first. My natural tendency is to listen first, to reflect on what people are saying, and to discern the meaning behind this. Then I can see the common ground and unifying themes.’ (p. 128)

By emulating the Native American behavior of listening and truly understanding the problem or issue, a leader is able to conceptualize and ensure that they are solving these problems or issues as well as meeting the overall goals of the organization.

The second behavior Northouse (2016) discussed pertaining to servant leadership is emotional healing. Northouse stated, "Servant leaders who exhibit emotional healing make themselves available to others, stand by them, and provide them with support" (p. 234). The behavior of emotional healing is greatly strengthened through integrating the components of Principle 9, *Gracias*, in the Bordas (2012) text. This principle focuses on spirituality and its ability to strengthen leadership. According to Bordas, "Through practicing gratitude and forgiveness communities of color have emerged as a spiritual force for healing and reconciliation" (p. 185).

Putting followers first is another vital behavior discussed in relation to servant leadership. Northouse (2016) expressed this behavior by stating, "It means using actions and words that clearly demonstrate to followers that their concerns are a priority, including placing followers' interests and success ahead of those of the leader" (p. 234). This behavior resonates in Principle 9 related to spirituality. Bordas (2012) affirmed, "Communities of color have always seen spiritual responsibility as doing good for others. This resonates with *seriti* and drives a collective and spiritually responsible form of leadership that uplifts the whole community" (p. 185).

Northouse (2016) stated: "At its core, helping followers grow and succeed is about aiding these individuals to become self-actualized, reaching their fullest human potential" (p. 234). This links directly to Principle 6 in the Bordas (2012) text, *Leaders as Community Stewards*. When discussing leaders as

community stewards, Bordas stated:

Leadership as community servanthood is central to American Indian culture. LaDonna Harris' working definition of leadership is "a communal responsibility with a concern for the welfare of the 'people' or tribe and then sharing the work that needs to be done based on skills and abilities." (p. 123)

An additional behavior enumerated as being essential to servant leadership is behaving ethically. Northouse (2016) defined this by stating, "Behaving ethically is holding strong ethical standards, including being open, honest, and fair with followers" (p. 235). Behaving ethically can be directly tied to Principle 9 in the Bordas (2012) text, which focuses on spirituality related to multicultural leadership. Bordas quoted a Native American, Bennie Shendo, by stating, "In my community, I could not even fathom the thought of separating the *spirituality* of who we are as a people from who I am. It is how we carry ourselves every day" (p. 185). Understanding how Native Americans incorporate ethical behavior into their daily lives is a model for leaders striving to fulfill the servant leadership approach.

Empowering is another behavior stated as fundamental to servant leadership. According to Northouse (2016), "Empowering is a way for leaders to share power with followers by allowing them to have control" (p. 235). Latino leaders provide an example that strengthens the approach of servant leadership in this area. Bordas (2012) stated, "Latino leaders must integrate the many critical issues that touch people's lives and motivate people to work together to address these. In this way, they grow people's capacity to engage in

concerted and collective action” (p. 106).

The final behavior discussed by Northouse (2016) associated with servant leadership is creating value for the community. Northouse asserted, “Servant leaders create value for the community by consciously and intentionally giving back to the community” (p. 235). This behavior is strengthened by Principle 5 in the Bordas (2012) text. According to Bordas, “African Americans are very concerned about community and justice. African Americans aspire to create a better life not only for their own people but to establish a society that cares for all people” (p. 101). This need to create value for the community within African American leadership can be traced back to the oppression they experienced in the past.

Through my role as a current leader in public education, I appreciate the manner in which the servant leadership approach resonates directly with leadership in an educational setting. I believe that all educators, from paraprofessionals to teachers to administrators, are servant leaders.

This is especially true of school systems with a high percentage of disadvantaged students. Greenleaf (1970) stated that a servant leader has a social responsibility to be concerned about the ‘have-nots’ and those less privileged. If inequalities and social injustices exist, a servant leader tries to remove them (Graham, 1991). By possessing a comprehensive understanding of servant leadership, along with the principles of multicultural leadership and how the concepts contained within each work together to create a strong framework, educators will be able to effectively encourage the progress of all students.

References

- Bordas, J. (2012). *Salsa, soul, and spirit: Leadership for a multicultural age* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Graham, J. W. (1991). Servant leadership in organizations: Inspirational and moral. *Leadership Quarterly*, 2, 105-119.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1970). *The servant as a leader*. Westfield, IN: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.
- Northouse, P. (2016). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (7th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

About the Author

Heather Gentry holds a B.S. from Lock Haven University, an M.Ed. from Regent University, and is an Ed.D. student in the Department of Educational Policy, Planning & Leadership at the College of William & Mary, with a concentration in Curriculum Leadership. She is currently the principal at Essex Intermediate School in Tappahannock, Virginia.