

TEACHING SERVANT LEADERSHIP:

Ansar Burney and Child Camel Jockeys

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide leadership studies educators with a resource to examine the work of a leader who displays characteristics of servant leadership. The lesson allows students to study a modern servant leader by examining their work on a specific issue and how their efforts resulted in significant change in an area of human rights. Using a YouTube video for this lesson makes this a teaching tool that can be implemented in face-to-face class meetings or online learning environments.

Introduction

Teaching socially responsible leadership is one of the key goals of contemporary leadership education (Komives & Wagner, 2016). Leadership educators work toward this goal by teaching theories and models of leadership that support a view that leaders should work to make positive change in groups, organizations, communities, and beyond. One of the most popular models of leadership that advocates for positive social change is servant leadership. Indeed, research points to companies such as Starbucks and Southwest Airlines that credit their organizational success to implementation of servant leadership practices (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, & Linden, 2019). Moreover Eva et al. (2019) identified over 250 papers written about servant leadership in a 20-year period through 2018, showing that the topic of servant leadership is a relevant and current topic in leadership studies.

Although popular, servant leadership can be an

especially difficult concept for students to understand as many students consider leadership from a positional standpoint: leadership comes from a title or position that allows leaders to control and direct followers in order to meet organizational goals. While servant leaders are stewards of their organization, they also display a strong focus on the empowerment and growth of their followers (Eva et al., 2019). This focus on putting followers first seems contrary to the study of leadership. For this reason, students should be encouraged to study a leader displaying the characteristics of servant leadership in a real-world situation.

Servant leadership originated in the work and writing of Robert K. Greenleaf. His view of leadership states that a leader should engage in behaviors that put followers first, where they are empowered and encouraged to develop into the best version of themselves. Specifically, Greenleaf describes servant leadership in the following manner:

"[Servant leadership] begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. The 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 be further deprived?" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 15)

Using this initial definition of servant leadership, Spears (2010) expands on Greenleaf's work by suggesting the following ten essential characteristics of a servant leader: listening, healing, conceptualization, empathy, awareness, persuasion, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. According to Spears (2010), individuals who work to develop these characteristics are taking steps toward becoming servant leaders. Servant leaders, in turn, use their skills to create positive social change, as stated by Greenleaf (1970).

More recently Eva et al. (2019) propose a new definition of servant leadership:

"Servant leadership is an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for the self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community" (132)

According to Eva et al. (2019), this modern definition of servant leadership focuses on the leader's motive, mode, and mindset. First, the motive of the leader

is towards others and away from a sense of self-orientation, a view that this style of leadership is highly altruistic. Second, the mode of servant leadership is one where the leader recognizes the fact that followers are individuals with unique needs, limitations, and goals and they should be encouraged to grow into the best version of themselves. Third, servant leadership is found when leaders take the needs of the larger community, beyond their organization, into account when making decisions. Using this definition, servant leadership is about a leader that focuses on something other than themselves, employs a high degree of interactions with followers, and is genuinely concerned with community well-being (Eva et al., 2019). Using this definition also allows for the further study of the leadership concept using two lenses: the characteristics that define servant leader (for practitioners) and servant leadership theory (for scholars) (Eva et al., 2019).

Servant leadership, like other abstract topics in leadership studies, can be learned through engagement in deep discussions with students. In order to encourage reflection and discussion, leadership educators often use illustrative examples that help students internalize the theory or model of leadership and apply it to their personal leadership development. For Generation Z students (individuals born between 1995 and 2010), educators employ everyday technological tools to engage with students (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). This includes the effective use of illustrative videos in the classroom.

Using videos in leadership education fits into the arts-based leadership pedagogy encouraged by Guthrie and Jenkins (2018). Videos and film can be used to teach leadership concepts in two ways: first, students can discuss and determine if the individual highlighted in media fits into the leadership concept being taught. Second, students may also examine the leadership characteristics and behaviors that the individual displays. Thus, students see leaders exemplifying leadership characteristics and actions.

For example, the film *Iron Jawed Angels* was used to examine Alice Paul as a leader and how she engaged others as an authentic leader (Scott & Weeks, 2016). Similarly, the HBO film *Temple Grandin* can be used to display the importance of identifying individual strengths in a leader such as Dr. Temple Grandin (Rosson & Weeks, 2018). Urick & Sprinkle (2018) used the blockbuster film *Wonder Woman* to illustrate gender diversity in leadership by studying the actions of superhero Diana of Themiscyra. Additionally, Raffo (2018) has used TED Talks to teach leadership concepts such as skills approach, servant leadership, and path-goal theory. For each video, Raffo (2018) asks students to explore how the TED speaker encourages others to develop these leadership characteristics. Finally, Raffo (2013) has also used the popular YouTube video *Leadership Lessons and the Dancing Guy* to discuss the importance of followership by examining the actions of an anonymous dancer at a concert. The use of films, YouTube videos, and TED Talks has proven to be an effective way to teach students critical leadership concepts by allowing them to see leadership characteristics and behaviors in leaders.

The video at the heart of this article is *From Small Enslaved Boys to Robot Jockeys (Full Segment)*, a story reported by sports journalist Bernard Goldberg for the HBO program *Real Sports*. The servant leader in the video is human rights activist Ansar Burney. Burney has devoted his life and career towards supporting human rights causes in Pakistan and the Middle East. This video highlights Burney's work to end the use of slave children as camel jockeys in races staged for Middle Eastern royalty.

This video has several positive points that make it a useful tool for leadership educators who are looking for a new way to examine servant leaders and characteristics of servant leadership in the classroom. First, the entire segment is freely available on YouTube and does not add cost to students, a growing concern in higher education (Whitaker & Greenleaf, 2019). Second, it is a short video, and at less than 30 minutes, can be easily incorporated into a 60 or 90 minute face-to-face class or online class

environment. Third, both the leader and topic allow students to explore servant leadership from a non-Western viewpoint. It is important to note that the video shows Burney working to free child slaves without specifically advocating for the end of camel races, a cultural aspect of the Middle East. Finally, the video shows Burney's work starting in 2004 and the concrete, tangible results of his efforts in ending the use of child camel jockeys by 2018. Again, the video is a tool that can be used by students to examine if Burney is a servant leader by examining whether or not he employs servant leadership behaviors and characteristics.

Description of the Practice

The following lesson plan is used in an Introduction to Leadership undergraduate course where I focus on building students' foundational knowledge of leadership studies. The class explores several major theories and models of leadership and through discussion and reflection, encourages students to apply this new knowledge to their personal leadership development. While I use the Northouse (2019) *Leadership: Theory and Practice* textbook, I have also used the Spears (2010) article as an additional resource to teach servant leadership. In this section, I describe how I use this lesson plan in a 90-minute class session.

Objectives. This lesson has four main objectives. By the end of the lesson, students should be able to do the following:

1. Describe servant leadership.
2. Recognize the ten characteristics of servant leadership in a real-world leader.
3. Discuss/determine if an individual is a servant leader or not.
4. Apply servant leadership characteristics to their personal leadership development.

Short Lecture. Before the class meeting, students

should have read the servant leadership chapter in the Northouse (2019) textbook or the Spears (2010) article. I begin the class by delivering a short (less than 10 minute) lecture reminding them of the definition of servant leadership and the ten characteristics of a servant leader. Next, I introduce Ansar Burney and his work to promote human rights across the Middle East and Pakistan. I then ask students to focus on the following questions that we will discuss after we watch the video:

- Using Greenleaf's definition of a servant leadership, answer the following question: Is Ansar Burney a servant leader? Why or why not? (Objectives 1 and 3)
- Which of the ten characteristics of servant leadership did Burney display in the course of the video? (Objectives 2 and 3)
- Who else in the video demonstrated the characteristics of servant leadership? (Objectives 2 and 3)

YouTube Video. After the short lecture and introduction of the discussion questions, the class watches the Burney video. Students are allowed to take notes during the 25-minute video so that they can participate in class discussion. As a side note, before the video begins, I warn students that there will be two very short instances where references will be made to the sexual abuse of children by adults. The major characters of the video are listed below:

- Ansar Burney, human rights activist
- Bernard Goldberg, journalist for HBO's Real Sports documentary series
- John Miller, U.S. ambassador in the State Department, charged with fighting human trafficking
- Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, Crown Prince of United Arab Emirates

Discussion. After the video ends, I display the initial

questions on a projection screen and give students about 3-5 minutes to quietly reflect on what they saw. After that time, there is class discussion and they begin to examine Ansar Burney through the lens of servant leadership. Generally, students identify all ten servant leadership characteristics in the video as shown in Table 1.

Additionally, Ansar Burney's leadership can fit into the modern definition of servant leadership proposed by Eva et al. (2019):

- Motive: Burney's work in the area of human rights for child camel jockeys displays his desire to serve others
- Mode: throughout the video, Burney makes specific references towards his recognition that children should be removed from their harsh living conditions so they can enjoy the healthy living conditions that will allow them to grow into their best selves
- Mindset: Burney states that ending the practice of using child camel jockeys benefits Middle Eastern society by displaying a tangible commitment to improving human rights

Table 1.
Ansar Burney and Servant Leadership Characteristics

Characteristic	Video Example
Empathy	Displays empathy when he accepts the children and treats them with dignity Does not reject children due to their poor circumstances
Listening	Listens to the rescued children and learns about the abuse they suffered Openly discusses his inner motivation to ensure children are treated with dignity
Healing	Gives rescued children health care, clean clothes, healthy meals, educational opportunities, and chances to play
Awareness	Brings awareness of the issue to people outside the Middle East through his undercover investigations Recognizes the power dynamics between the wealthy sheiks who sponsor the races and poor children who risk their lives Recognizes the value of preserving the sport of camel racing, just without the use of children as camel jockeys
Persuasion	Used undercover video highlighting the conditions of the child camel jockeys to persuade sheiks to ban this practice
Conceptualization	Realizes the day to day realities of the child camel jockeys and used that as a basis to conceptualize a plan for their healthy growth and potential
Stewardship	Burney's task force is specifically focused on the greater good of ending human rights violations against children
Building community	Built a community of former child jockeys so that they can heal together
Commitment to the growth of people	Rescued the children and gave them opportunities to grow up in a healthy environment Nasir is an example of growth: he is married with a child and has his own shop
Foresight	Burney specifically talks about imagining a healthy, happy future for the freed children

Post-Class Self-Reflective Questions (for Journals or Online Discussions). The following questions can be used to further student exploration of servant leadership as part of journal assignments or online reflection.

- Do you consider yourself a servant leader? Why or why not? (Objective 4)
- How can you use the servant

leadership of Ansar Burney as an example to shape your personal leadership development? (Objective 4)

Conclusion

This paper presents a resource for leadership educators to teach servant leadership using a real-world leader. I believe that teaching servant leadership is a critical way to support socially responsible leadership development for today's students. The servant leadership of Ansar Burney is a powerful example of how servant leadership is employed to create concrete change in an area of human rights that students may not be aware of. Overall, student response to the use of this video has been positive. The comments below are typical for this activity:

- "This video gave us a good example of someone who was willing to find a solution to a major issue in his country and the qualities that make him a good steward to his people. The video portrayed the obstacles he had encountered and perfectly showed his leadership in working with others and his passion to serve."
- "The video was a great depiction of servant leadership. It showed so many of the values a servant leader has. It showed what it looks like to lead and care so deeply about a cause. Being a servant leader has so much to do with caring about what you're working towards and the video did a great job in helping me see that."
- "The video of Ansar Burney effectively illustrated servant leadership. In my opinion, I was able to vividly see the struggles and successes of being a servant leader. Similar to what we mentioned in class, servant leadership is a conflicting term, however, the video helped me put servant leadership into context."
- "Burney displays many attributes of servant leadership, and is inspiring through his work. He helps free the children, despite all of the dangers,

and you can tell he is willing to do anything for his cause, specifically putting his followers above himself."

- "The video did help illustrate what servant leadership is in such a positive tone because as I was reading I took servant leadership as such a negative type of leadership. The idea of a leader serving his or her followers almost seemed contradictory or a pushover type of leader. Thus I did not get the connection until I saw the video and how impactful servant leadership can be because he did go with all the principles of servant leadership but he did it in such a positive way where I didn't expect it."

As previously noted, students may be confused by the concept of servant leadership. The idea of non-positional leadership where the leader actively puts the follower first seems like a paradox. However, I believe that seeing the work of Ansar Burney and how his leadership actively advances the issue of human rights for a specific group of people (child camel jockeys) helps students contextualize how a leader can use influence to put the needs of followers first. Leadership educators can use this resource to help students not only recognize servant leadership, but also to develop themselves as servant leaders.

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