



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN A CHANGING CULTURE: REFLECTIONS ON THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT

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As in any other society, the principles of servant-leadership have an incontestable appeal to Brazilian corporate environment, but the term *servant* may not sound terribly attractive to people from the Brazilian culture. In fact, this is one of the struggles we face when spreading the servant-leadership philosophy among business corporations and Brazilian society at large. Recently, in a class on Leadership Teamwork for Masters students at University of Santo Amaro, in São Paulo, I strategically decided to explore the servant-leadership concept as the foundation of the course, so I outlined the topic on the course syllabus. As I introduced the concept for discussion among the students (most of whom came from different business corporations), I could feel three different consecutive reactions: first, they were shocked by the idea of leading different levels of the company without the traditional, heavily controlled style they are used to; second, as the class continued, they were amazed by the idea of giving priority to people and their potential as persons and professionals; and third, they raised the topic of how difficult it is to accept the idea of *servant* in the Brazilian corporate environment.

Astonished by the students' reactions, I decided to ask the following two interview questions of the 28 students:

What does the term *servant* mean to you?

Which factors do you think may have influenced your conception of *servant*?



Although I have not completed an extensive research project on this topic, a few preliminary conclusions or suppositions came out of this first conversation with my students. As the students reported, the main reason for the reluctance to use the term *servant* may be found in part in the roots of the Brazilian culture. According to the students, two main issues may play a significant role in creating this context: religious background and historical background, which I comment on briefly below.

INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

From a religious point of view, Brazilian culture has been influenced by the dominant popular religion in the country, which is the Catholic religion with its strong traditions, beliefs, and culture. Most Brazilians follow a Catholic tradition, although the percentage of the population that does so has decreased in the last years, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: *Religious Background of the Brazilian Population*

Religious Background of the Brazilian Population						
Year	Catholics		Evangelicals		No Religion	
	%	Million People	%	Million People	%	Million People
1991	83.8	121.8	9.05	13	4.8	7
2000	73.8	125	15.45	26	7.3	12.3

Note: Data from Alberto Antoniazzi (2003). As religiões no Brasil segundo o censo de 2000. *Revista de Estudos da Religião* (2), 75-80. Retrieved October 27, 2004, from: http://www.pucsp.br/rever/rv2_2003/p_antoni.pdf.

The implication of this Catholic dominance for the concept of servant-leadership seems to be related to the religious culture. While the evangelical culture is based mostly on Bible records and gospel stories, the Catholic culture is based mostly on the Church's traditions and teachings. Therefore, the concept of *servant* as represented by Biblical and ethical values is not as



clear for a Catholic culture as it seems to be for an Evangelical culture. In other words, in a Catholic culture there seems to be no clear distinction between the concept of *servant*, which implies the idea of belonging and dedication, and the concept of *slave*, more related to the idea of passive submission and an object of exploitation. The concept of *servant-first*, implying the idea of serving people's highest-priority needs (Greenleaf, 2000; Spears, 1995), is not echoed by the term *slave*, which is strongly tied to the idea of blind obedience and having no choice or initiative. So the semantic confusion between the terms *servant* and *slave* in the Brazilian culture presents a significant challenge to engaging in servant-leadership as a way of life in familial as well as corporate culture.

From a historical point of view, like many other Western cultures, Brazilian culture was strongly influenced by a long period of slavery in the colonial society. This slavery background favors the same semantic confusion between the images of servant and slave. Adding to this context, another ingredient that emerged in recent Brazilian history is the 20-year military dictatorship from 1964 to 1984, when Congress was responsible for assigning the president of the country and there was no popular vote at all. At that time, Brazil faced terrorism of the right and the left, and the military police responded to guerrilla attacks with widespread torture and the formation of death squads to eradicate dissidents. This background of violence made people somewhat uncomfortable with anything that sound like submission, which may be easily associated with the confused distinction between servant and slave in the Brazilian culture.

In the early eighties, an extensive popular movement toward democracy, known as *Diretas já* (meaning "electoral votes now"), took place throughout the country, demanding political change that would allow people to elect the President of the country. Finally, a civilian government was restored in 1985 when all citizens were given the right to vote.

Now things have changed and are still changing in Brazil. The political, economic, and social panorama is in the middle of a dynamic change. That means that there is room for changing the concept of leadership as



well, and for introducing the revolutionary new concept of servant-leadership.

A LEADERSHIP CHANGE AGENT

One of the most influential persons in consolidating this process of political, economic, and social change in Brazil was sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who became the third president of Brazil, elected by popular vote after the military dictatorship, and the twenty-fifth president in Brazilian history.

In 1995, Cardoso was elected to his first term as president of Brazil, and then in 1999 he was elected to a second term—the first president ever democratically re-elected in Brazil. During his presidency from January 1995 to January 2003, Seidman (2004) states, Cardoso strengthened political institutions, increased economic stability and growth, and expanded educational opportunities for all Brazilians while promoting human rights and development. In addition, high school enrollments increased more than one third, and the number of students entering college doubled. Cardoso's emphasis on improving health care in poor rural areas resulted in a 25% decrease in infant mortality. The United Nations Development Program recognized his work with the inaugural Mahbub ul Haq Award for Outstanding Contribution to Human Development. In 1986 he was selected as the Fulbright Program's 40th anniversary distinguished fellow and lectured at Columbia University on democracy in Brazil.

According to Seidman (2004), "After two terms as Brazil's president, Cardoso is surely the most public sociologist in the world, a global figure who is currently advising the United Nations on how to incorporate global civil society into international deliberations." Formerly president of the International Sociological Association, Cardoso now is professor-at-large at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies. His research, including his early work on Brazilian racial inequality and later research on the political economy of Latin America, opened new lines of inquiry for scholars around the world.



Cardoso's lecture during a recent fellowship at the Library of Congress reflects a remarkable dual career. As Seidman (2004) comments, "Simultaneously sociologist and elder statesman, he is as likely to invoke Keynes, Habermas, or Marx as he is to mention a recent conversation with Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela, or Kofi Annan."

On October of 2003, the Fulbright Association announced that the 2003 J. William Fulbright Prize for International Understanding was awarded to Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the former president of Brazil, who consolidated his country's democracy, curbed inflation there, and invested in health, education, and human development programs recognized by the United Nations as international models (Anderson, 2003).

CARDOSO'S PRESENTATION AT GREENLEAF CENTER—BRAZIL

Realizing that there is room for change and for introducing the concept of servant-leadership in Brazil, the CBEL—Brazilian Center for Leadership Studies, which is now the Greenleaf Center-Brazil, is little by little promoting events and presentations to create a consciousness regarding a new leadership paradigm. On July 21, 2003, CBEL invited Fernando Henrique Cardoso to be the keynote speaker at the Annual Leadership Conference, held by the University of Santo Amaro, in São Paulo, Brazil. In the opening ceremony, Cardoso spoke to a vast audience of Brazilian businesspersons, CEOs of different companies, politicians, educators, and graduate students about his vision of leadership. He contrasted traditional views of leadership with a more relational, social, and "democratic" approach. A summary of his lecture was published on CBEL Newsletter and the full text of the newsletter is presented below.

Leadership, Today

by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Former President of Brazil, 1995–2003

The literature about leadership is vast. It is not our purpose to summarize it. However, as a starting point and referring to a classic on sociology, I will point out Max Weber's contribution.



Weber's analyses are more than well known. In him, it is difficult to distinguish the forms of leadership from the forms of domination. This close to overlapping situation is more clearly seen in the qualification of one of the three basic forms of domination, the so-called charismatic.

Weber shows how, in certain circumstances, a very traditional order may be brought down through the transforming action of a leader (religious, political, etc.) who, exciting his or her followers through personal qualities, might have the gift (the charisma) to renew an organization (and even society).

The relationship of domination, which takes place from then on, is personal. The leader in this case possesses intrinsic qualities that make him or her a conductor, for example through faith, vision, and so on. But all this charisma may become routine and be confused with another form of domination—the traditional one.

In this latter form, people accept the command and comply because of the "sanctity of tradition." In other words, because it has always been so. The leader (sometimes the eldest, the head of the family, the king, etc.) legitimizes him- or herself through these routine criteria of "respect for the established order."

In the current world (Weber's), there will come a new form of domination, which he called "rational-legal." The command (sometimes the leadership) can be exercised by one person or by a bureaucracy, by elected representatives, or by corporation delegates. For any case there are ("rational") legal rules that set limits to power and demand the leader (be it the President of the Republic, elected, or someone else) to justify him- or herself: according to such and such law, or this or that constitutional order, this is my decision.

Well all these distinctions may inspire the understanding of the exercise of leadership. In today's world, however, without minimizing the leader's personal attributes, leadership is fundamentally exercised through communication, convincing, in a social relationship. In this way, leadership



is always exercised in a rational context. And the more dynamic the organization or global society itself, the more variable the context.

That being the case, leadership demands flexibility, capacity to listen to the next person (due to the relational, democratic character of today's world), and at the same time a vision to be presented, based on the values that may bind the relationship between leaders and followers, and the drive to seek objectives.

It is not so much about charisma, as it is about capacity, the competence, in complex societies, to point direction, motivate, accept divergence and convince. Through etymology, to contrive means to "win together." The leader, therefore, has to make others, up to a certain point, feel he (or she) is a companion (through etymology, "he who breaks bread together" or "eats the same bread"). I say up to a certain extent because he or she needs to differentiate for having greater perception, more preparation, better "vision," to excite followers and conduce them (to pilot, actually) "in the direction of their values and objectives."

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