



THE ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACTS OF COMMUNITY ON RETENTION AND SATISFACTION

A Sociological Approach to Servant-Leadership

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The theme of community has been extensively researched in the sociological field; for many years sociologists have studied how community impacts various factors of the human experience. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the elements of community materialize within, and carry an influence throughout, the arena of leadership. By focusing on the potential that servant-leaders have for establishing community within organizations, it will be seen that the powerful effects thereof can be identified and understood on a scale much smaller than the town, city, or society—entities often the focus of the sociological study. The elements of community can be identified on a smaller scale up to and including the workplace, the volunteer organization, and the family, for example.

Community, like leadership, can be difficult to define; however, one recognizes it when one sees it (Bennis 1989, 1; see also Tonnies 1996). While there has been extensive research on the social impacts of community in the field of sociology, the application of these concepts are comparatively scarce in the more microfocused fields of management and leadership. While references to the components of community can be found in a number of articles, identifying and exploring the idea of community in and of itself is relatively sparse in organizational writings (Armstrong-Stassen and Cameron 2005; Martin and Schmidt 2010). Nevertheless, a growing number of researchers are incorporating the sociological applications of community into leadership, organizational, and management studies (Bausch 1998; Block 1998; Spears 1998; Wicker 1998). This paper highlights how servant-leaders establish an atmosphere of community and how an organizational environment rich in these elements will have a positive impact on the inter-related variables of employee satisfaction and attachment/retention.



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Emerging out of the work and writings of Robert Greenleaf, servant-leadership brings a refined dignity and greater scope to the leadership landscape. Rather than assuming that followers are a mechanism to be manipulated, servant-leadership, at its very core, recognizes the inherent value of each individual and honors their presence in the leader/follower relationship. With concern for all, even the least privileged in society, the servant-leader marshals the collective talents of all toward the achievement of goals and tasks that elicit the pride and satisfaction inherent in the accomplishment of great things (Greenleaf 2002).

Inevitably, it is a matter of perspective. Is the role of a leader to produce certain ends through whatever means necessary, or rather, does the leadership role include a certain stewardship over and for the follower? According to servant-leadership, it is the latter; the leader is steward of the individuals he/she leads, holding in trust the power, authority, and responsibility for the followers' growth and development (Greenleaf 2002). The dignity and trust necessary to gain access to the inner realms of the human heart and the environment necessary to unleash the creative potential inherent in humanity are the hallmarks of servant-leadership.

As borders grow more transparent and as markets evolve, the call for servant-leaders grows in volume and intensity. In reference to the increasing prominence of servant-leadership, Covey states:

There is a growing awareness and consciousness around it in the world. One of the things that is driving it...is the global economy, which absolutely insists on quality at low cost. You've got to produce more for less, and with greater speed than you've ever done before. The only way you can do that in a sustained way is through the empowerment of people. And the only way you get empowerment is through high trust cultures and through an empowerment philosophy that turns bosses into servants and coaches. (cited in Spears 1998, xi)

As the growing need for servant-leaders emerges, clearly societal factors, including the state of the global economy, enhance the overall demand for leaders who can empower and motivate followers in a meaningful way.

Traditionally, the organizational atmosphere was one of low trust and limited autonomy (Auerbach 1996; Golembiewski 1965; Massie 1965). Workers were expected to do their job with little allowance for feedback and development. However, as Covey points out, the world is changing and the



call for servant-leaders continues to grow. If organizations do not embrace the power of the human spirit, they will find themselves left behind in an environment that rewards creativity and values innovation.

Much of the momentum that servant-leadership has gained over the years has come at the hands of Larry Spears, the foremost scholar of servant-leadership following the death of Robert Greenleaf. According to Spears's Web site, the *Spears Center for Servant-Leadership* is an organization dedicated to creating "a more caring and serving world through the understanding and practice of servant-leadership" (www.spearscenter.org). In a seminal article on servant-leadership, Spears outlined the characteristics of a servant-leader. The ten characteristics were compiled as a result of an extensive review of Greenleaf's work, and they "are of critical importance" to the understanding of servant-leadership (Spears 1998, 3).

The ten characteristics of the servant-leader are: listening; empathy; healing; awareness; persuasion; conceptualization; foresight; stewardship; commitment to the growth of people; and building community (Spears 1998, 4–6). Each of these characteristics is integral to the understanding of servant-leadership; however, in this paper, I will focus on the characteristic of community building. In order to fully appreciate the potential that the servant-leader has for community building, it is important to understand and appreciate the scope and impact of the notion of community itself.

COMMUNITY

Community has been around as long as people have been gathering together in groups. However, it was not until the German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies introduced the contrasting ideas of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (*community* and *society*) that community became a major subject of study (Tonnies 1996). According to Tonnies, exclusive and intimate relationships along with the resulting associations that emerge are the "essential characteristics of *gemeinschaft* (*community*)" (ibid., 33), whereas "the imaginary or mechanical structure" composed of the environment of mores and folkways wherein these intimate associations emerge, is referred to as *Gesellschaft* (*society*) (ibid., 33–34).

Tonnies talks about *gemeinschaft* to illustrate the deep sense of unity that exists as community; he refers to it as "unity of being" (Tonnies 1996, 42). To further understand the characteristics of community, he



refers to *gemeinschaft* of place (neighborhood), and *gemeinschaft* of mind (friendship). Each type of *gemeinschaft* refers to a social state wherein all participants enjoy close personal and/or social contacts and intimate understandings of one another.

Tonnies's description of "law, as a reflection of life" further illustrates the difference between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*:

Law, as a reflection of life, advances from unions of *gemeinschaft* to associations of *gesellschaft*. For them are substituted associations of *gesellschaft* which finally develop into unions of *gesellschaft*. The relationships of the first type come under family law and law of possession; the others belong to the law of contracts and property law. The prototype of all unions of *gemeinschaft* is the family....The three pillars of *gemeinschaft*—blood, place (land), and mind, or kinship, neighborhood, and friendship—are all encompassed in the family...the associations of *gemeinschaft* are most perfectly interpreted as friendship, *gemeinschaft* of spirit and mind based on common work or calling and thus on common beliefs. (Tonnies 1996, 192)

As Tonnies illustrates, the association of family illustrates the shared goals and common cause found within an atmosphere of *gemeinschaft*.

While the concept of *gemeinschaft* may be illustrated well within the family unit, it extends beyond that, and the unity of place and mind are indicative of what is also found in social arrangements such as those found in the workplace. In fact,

There are federations for which the *gemeinschaft* of spirit or mind represents its main significance and which are not only maintained but also formed voluntarily. These are especially the corporations or fellowships of the arts and crafts, the communities, churches, and holy orders. In all these the idea of the family persists. (Tonnies 1996, 192)

It is possible for any organization to experience the same advantages of *gemeinschaft* that are experienced in the family or a close communal arrangement. It is at this point that the relationship of leadership and community building emerges.

Leadership is a challenging art. There is so much expected of a leader that it can be difficult to know where to focus one's efforts. However, there are some activities that yield more impact than others, and one of those is the establishment of an environment of community (*gemeinschaft*). As Spears says:



The servant-leader senses that much has been lost in recent human history as a result of the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shaper of human lives. The awareness causes the servant-leader to seek to identify some means for building community among those who work within a given institution. Servant-leadership suggests that true community can be created among those who work in business and other institutions. Greenleaf said: "All that is needed to build community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his own unlimited liability for a quite specific community related group." (Spears 1998, 6)

Much of the social experience is dominated by a sense of *gesellschaft*—mechanistic, limited human interaction, being perceived as a means to an end, rather than an end in and of ourselves. The cry for community continues to increase, and our organizations need leaders that recognize the impact of community (*gemeinschaft*) and understand how to cultivate and nurture it.

ATTACHMENT AND SATISFACTION

Macro Level Sociological Literature

Community is not a tangible object that can be bought and sold and stored on the shelf—so how is it measured? As mentioned above, community has been studied in the social sciences for many years, and one of the ways that community is measured is by assessing a number of social indicators. A large body of research exists on "quality of life" or "community experience" frameworks that shed light on how community can be assessed and measured (Berger-Schmitt 2002; Brown, Xu, Barfield, and King 2000). Although different authors use different terms to refer to how residents *feel* about their community (Berger Schmitt 2002; and Finsterbusch 1980, for example, both use the term *quality of life*), the indicators they generally use show considerable consistency.

Much of the community experience literature uses two indicators to evaluate how residents of a given locale feel about it: *community satisfaction* and *community attachment* (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974; Marans and Rogers 1975; Buttel 1976; Goudy 1990; Brown et al. 2000). In most instances these concepts have been considered one and the same thing or, minimally, elements of each other. For example, Berger-Schmitt (2002) combines many of the indicators that measure both concepts into one



all-encompassing term usually referred to simply as community experience or community satisfaction. However, as illustrated by Brown et al. (2002), combining satisfaction and attachment into one indicator masks several unique dimensions of each indicator. They argue that satisfaction with and attachment to a community are separate, though highly related aspects of one's community experience (Brown et al. 2000). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, attachment and satisfaction are viewed as separate indices.

Community Attachment

Although there are varying definitions of community attachment, each definition is related, directly or indirectly, to the work of Kasarda and Janowitz. In their study of community ties they concluded, "The local community is viewed as a complex system of friendship and kinship networks and formal and informal associational ties rooted in family life and the on going socialization processes" (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974, 329). Consequently, how attached one is to one's local community, becomes an indicator of one's family and social life as well. It taps into values that are articulated and played out in a local context. More than community satisfaction, it captures more the commitment to the place itself. Thus, community attachment is defined in relation to the quality of social relations among residents of a particular community, "their community." Because communities are a complex combination of formal and informal social networks, the quality of these network bonds directly affects the individual's interpretation of the local community; the individual's affinity for the local community is thus defined in terms of the quality of their social networks. Therefore, levels of community attachment increase as residents report higher levels of community solidarity. Community attachment is thus an individual's "sense of rootedness to a place... (their) sense of fit in a locality" (Brown et al. 2000, 430).

To gain greater insight into Tonnies's example of *gemeinschaft*, it helps to understand this concept of attachment. Whereas in a *gesellschaft* type setting, social relations are mechanistic and limited, the social relationships of *gemeinschaft* are a strong indicator of one's feeling attached to a certain locale. In one study community attachment was illustrated through factors such as a sense of belonging to a community and experiencing expressions of emotional connection to the community—factors directly related to Tonnies's definition of *gemeinschaft* (Kulig, Stewart, Penz, Forbes, Morgan, and Emerson 2009).



Community Satisfaction

In addition to community attachment, another social indicator that is highly indicative of the community experience is *community satisfaction*. Social scientists have measured community satisfaction in a variety of ways (Sirgy and Cornwell 2002). For example, the U.S. Census Bureau measures *neighborhood quality* in the Annual Housing Survey (AHS) with two composite indices: *access to public services* and *respondents' perceptions of conditions in their neighborhoods* (Sirgy and Cornwell 2002). As Sirgy and Cornwell state, "The assumption, of course, is that both evaluations of the quality of local public services and the perceptions of these...neighborhood conditions do affect the perception of neighborhood quality or *neighborhood satisfaction*" (ibid., 80).

However, measurement of goods and services may only capture a narrow band of one's larger community experience. Consequently, more global measures of satisfaction have also been utilized by past researchers. Residents are typically asked to report on a Likert scale how satisfied they are with where they live and also to compare their present community to their ideal place of residence (Brown 1993; Brown et al. 2000). Such global measures give a more generic sense of how residents feel about their community at a specific moment in time, not just how they feel about the availability of specific goods and services. Consequently, such measures are valuable indicators for tracking shifts in community satisfaction over time.

As demonstrated, community satisfaction and community attachment are two powerful indicators of the community experience. These two indicators have traditionally been used to illustrate the macro-level assessment of the community experience in villages, towns, and cities; however, similar indices have been examined in the more microlevel world of organizations. While they have not been extensively used as indicators of community within organizations, the sociological findings around community attachment and satisfaction support the idea that job satisfaction and retention (attachment) illustrate similar aspects of the community experience.

MICROLEVEL ORGANIZATIONAL LITERATURE

While the concepts of community attachment and community satisfaction emerged in the sociological literature more than forty years ago, the application of these concepts to the organizational and management



studies began with Herzberg's Two Factor Theory of job satisfaction (1966). However, it was not until the last thirty years that much has been written on these topics (Armstrong-Stassen and Cameron 2005; Armstrong, Hawley, Lewis, Blankenship, and Pugsley 2008). Job satisfaction, and hence, its impact on an individual's intent to remain at their current job (retention) has now been studied in a variety of fields extending from higher education to nursing (Hegney 2006; Armstrong-Stassen and Cameron 2005).

Job Satisfaction

The process of measuring job satisfaction is very similar to the processes employed in studying community satisfaction (Kulig et al. 2009; Felps, Mitchell, Hekman, Lee, Holtom, and Harman 2009). By looking at the factors related to job satisfaction, researchers are able to identify the reasons individuals leave their current place of employment. These factors, as in the sociological studies, can be broad and varied. They include things such as management standards, pay, heavy workload, the stressful nature of a job, lack of appreciation, and being taken for granted (Evans and Huxley 2008). In addition, some researchers employ a method that is commonly used in the social sciences (Sirgy and Cornwell 2002), that of asking employees to rate their level of satisfaction on a scale from one to ten with ten being high satisfaction (Evans and Huxley 2008).

The importance of job satisfaction in influencing an employee's intent to leave cannot be understated. There are a wide variety of reasons an individual would seek alternative employment; however, the complaint that emerges repeatedly in the literature is dissatisfaction with one or more elements of a job (Evans and Huxley 2008; Armstrong et al. 2008). There is clearly a strong relationship between job satisfaction and an individual's intent to either stay or leave.

Retention

While the concepts of satisfaction and attachment (retention) are studied both in the sociological and organizational/management literature, the reasons for these studies are quite different. The point of much of the sociological literature is to understand the viability of rural communities and to identify potential areas of need (Kulig et al. 2009). The purpose of the organizational/managerial research, however, is more focused on



understanding the factors that contribute to turnover and the associated costs connected thereto (Felps et al. 2009). The fact that job satisfaction is so closely linked to job retention and the economic costs associated with it illustrates the need for leaders who understand how, and have the skills to, influence job satisfaction. One leadership theory that leads to an increase in job satisfaction and, therefore, a decrease in turnover, is servant-leadership. Servant-leaders work to establish a sense of community within the organizations they lead, an atmosphere that provides stronger social relations that then lead to a strong sense of job satisfaction.

THE SERVANT-LEADER'S IMPACT ON RETENTION AND SATISFACTION

Based on the findings of the sociological, as well as the organizational and management literature, there is a strong relationship between an employee's level of job satisfaction and his/her intent to remain at their current place of employment. It has also been demonstrated in the sociological literature that if an environment exists where the elements of community—*gemeinschaft*—are present, satisfaction and attachment are higher (Johnson and Knop 1970); therefore, it can be assumed that retention rates in organizations would be higher as well. Thus, if an organizational leader can create an environment of community, his/her employees will be more satisfied with their jobs and will be more likely to remain with the current organization. It is at this point that a strong case for a servant-leader can be made.

As mentioned above, it was the work of Robert Greenleaf that established servant-leadership as a mainstay within the general leadership literature, and it has been the work of Larry Spears, among a number of servant-leadership scholars, that has enabled the growth and influence of this theoretical perspective since the death of Greenleaf. Clearly, one way that a servant-leader affects those he/she leads is through the establishment of a sense of community within the organizations he or she leads. It is this ability to establish community that then affects the satisfaction and retention levels among those being led.

As community engagement declines, and *gemeinschaft* becomes more difficult to identify, institutions where people come together, for instance, the workplace, take on a whole new meaning as a source of community; "The workplace has the potential to be the place where community is revived and common purpose is reawakened" (Block 1998, 92). There is a new way of thinking emerging in the corporate world today and "seeing the workplace



as the new community is part of that thinking” (Wicker 1998, 247). And it is servant-leadership that is precisely the right leadership approach to establishing this culture of community.

Along with these developments, the conventional workplace motivators are losing their luster and employees are looking beyond what the workplace traditionally had to offer and searching for belonging. Peter Block, for example, argues against the habitual use of money as the primary motivator in the workplace (Block 1993). His assertion is that a motivation system based on monetary rewards does not lead to the satisfaction and retention necessary for viable organizations. Money promotes self-interest, which destroys organizations. However, he continues, “self-interest is fed by individualism and overcome by community” (Block 1993, 67).

Advancing this argument, Block contends that “community is about coming together in pursuit of some kind of purpose, some kind of goal that has meaning...sooner or later all of us are going to get to the point that (we realize) ‘I can’t survive unless we choose ‘we’” (Block 1998, 250). Thus, paradoxically, our self-interest is best served in the service of something larger than ourselves, in the service of others.

It is precisely this going beyond ourselves, transcending the self, that is at the heart of a culture of community. For example, according to Conn,

My basic understanding of the self is rooted in the premise that every person has a radical desire to reach out, to move beyond, to transcend the self. This drive is so basic and all encompassing that it includes in some way all the specific drives and more....This radical desire for self transcendence is at the source of everything that is specifically human, and is realized in every genuine instance of creative understanding, critical judging, responsible deciding, and generous loving. (Conn 1998, 323–24)

The idea of self transcendence is inextricably linked to the establishment of community. As individuals come together in gatherings of community, the workplace, for example, this “radical desire to reach out, to move beyond, to transcend the self” is given place; it is enabled in its desire to flourish.

Taking this process of self-transcendence in community building, Thomas Merton explained that it is precisely through this process of transcending the self in the service of others that one is able to identify who he/she really is:

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to



which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life trying to accumulate pleasures and experiences and power and honor and knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself up with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface. (Merton 1949, 28–29)

It is this process of deception that many of us find ourselves in, living a life of falsehood. The problem with this false self is that “there is no substance under the things” we have used to construct who we are (*ibid.*, 29). If we persist throughout life in this state we will one day come to realize that

I am hollow, and my structure of pleasures and ambitions has no foundation...and when they are gone there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness, to tell me that I am a mistake. (*ibid.*, 29)

This statement illustrates the beneficial characteristics of servant-leadership. As servant-leaders construct an environment of community, one where *gemeinschaft* is ever present, individuals will discover an arena wherein they can transcend their own egocentric desires and discover how their unique talents and abilities can be of benefit to others.

CONCLUSION

Servant-leadership is a growing theoretical approach to leadership. Compared to other leadership theories it is still quite young; however, its impact upon the field of leadership continues to grow in scope and magnitude. There are a number of ways that servant-leadership impacts the organizational landscape. From empathetic leadership to healing, from conceptualization to foresight (Spears 1998), the servant-leader has the opportunity to make a great impact upon the leadership horizon.

The focus of this paper has been to illustrate how one of the primary components of servant-leadership—community building—can have a strong and lasting impact upon not only the organizational culture collectively, but also upon each follower individually. The strength of community has been illustrated through the established research base in sociology that looks at the macro-level benefits to establishing strong community ties. This research has



shown there to be a clear increase in community satisfaction and community attachment in those locales where community ties are strong. The argument of this paper is that as servant-leaders strive to establish a culture of community within the organizations they lead, both job satisfaction and retention will increase.

Furthermore, there is a paradoxical element to the establishment of community, an element emphasized in the following statement by Conn:

Self-transcendence stands in firm opposition to any meaning of self-fulfillment, which focuses on the self as a collection of wishes to be filled. In contrast, the experience of self-transcendence supports the...paradoxical view that authentic self-realization results not from a self-centered effort to fulfill one's every wish, but from a movement beyond oneself in an attempt to realize the good of others. (Conn 1998, 324)

Servant-leadership is a leadership approach that allows for the fulfillment of each individual involved in the leader/follower relationship.

Ultimately, there is limited research on the impact of community upon job satisfaction and retention; most of the studies are found in the nursing field focusing on how to retain top talent—especially in rural settings (Kulig et al. 2009). More research must be done on the ultimate impact of community upon retention. Just as in the sociological community studies, there needs to be more focus on the impact of community on satisfaction and retention. The emergence of information relative to the relationship between community and job satisfaction and retention will only further the call for an understanding and consequent implementation of servant-leadership.

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