MOTIVATING LANGUAGE AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE OUTCOMES

Sandra Gutierrez-Wirsching, Jacqueline Mayfield, Milton Mayfield
Texas A&M International University, 5201 University Blvd, Laredo TX 78045
Sandra Gutierrez-Wirsching lupegut@dusty.tamiu.edu, Jacqueline Mayfield jmayfield@tamiu.edu, Milton Mayfield mmayfield@tamiu.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes motivating language as a mediator to increase the positive effects of servant leadership on subordinates’ outcomes. We suggest motivating language acts as a mediator to transmit servant leadership traits, and enhances the positive impact that servant leadership verbal behavior has on employees’ performance. In the proposed model, motivating language acts as a full and a partial mediator. We further categorize three distinct outcome sets that should be improved from this relationship. The first set includes improved worker performance, job satisfaction, absenteeism, and worker innovation. The second set in composed by trust, satisfaction with the leader, and inspiration to become servant leaders. Finally, the third set includes self-efficacy, organizational citizenship behavior, and employee commitment.

Keywords: motivating language, servant leadership, employees’ outcomes.

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Today’s business environment is fraught with ethical scandals. At the same time, much more public scrutiny is cast on the ethical behavior of employees and the quality of their work life (Carroll and Buchholtz 2012; Cascio, 2010). One emergent remedy to these dilemmas is the growing presence of servant leadership (Dierendonk, 2011). Yet, despite such progress, the construct of servant leadership is not well defined, including key inherent processes such as leader communication (Yukl, 2013). This paper addresses this issue by developing a model of how leader strategic language mediates between servant leadership and worker outcomes. According to Spears (1998), leaders have always been valued for their communication skills. However, very little attention has been paid to the communications role in the servant leadership process. Specifically, there is a lack of process models that incorporate well-tested leader communication constructs into servant leader theory (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2012). There is also little research to illustrate what aspects of servant leadership will be transmitted through communication. We propose that a viable way for servant leaders to communicate will be through motivating language. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: an overview of
servant leadership, a synopsis motivating language theory, a subsequent model and propositions, then implications and future directions for research and practice, and concluding remarks.

**Servant Leadership**

Dierendonck (2011) points out the relevance of servant leadership to the modern workplace. He argues that “current demand for more ethical, people-centered management…[and since] innovation and employee well being are given high priority, a leadership that is rooted in ethical and caring behavior becomes of great importance.” (Dierendonck 2011). In light of ethical failures such as the Enron and the recent Madoff scandal, there is a compelling reason to explore the servant leadership style, which adds a humane, ethical component to the management of people. After all, organizations facilitate outcomes through people, and these workers must also be regarded as stakeholders due to their crucial role in achieving high productivity levels. Additionally, employee sentiments can directly impact the customer as well as other job related outcomes. Greenleaf (1977) advocated that one of organization’s main objectives should encompass social responsibility, and that servant leaders should advocate this vision.

Greenleaf (1977) coined the term servant leadership in 1970 (Dierendonck 2011). His most salient quote about servant leadership is as follows:

The Servant-Leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. . . . The best test, and difficult to administer is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not further be harmed? (p.13)

In spite of the relevance of servant leadership, Greenleaf never gave a precise definition. Spears (1998), who had worked alongside with Greenleaf for many years, listed ten characteristics of a servant leader: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. According to Spears, when leaders exercise their role as servants:

People stretch towards their potential and become more valuable assets; with more autonomy, they use their freedom to work smarter; they are encouraged to share; collaboration is encouraged, which becomes the opportunity for synergy; with all of the above, the cycle time for problem solving is reduced; organizations systems function more optimally; services are rendered with greater value-added benefits for the customers; and better health is likely, which has an economic as well as humanitarian value (1998, p. 320).
Other prominent scholars have developed diverse interpretations of servant leadership, since this type of leadership lacks a generally agreed upon definition (Dierendonck 2011). Some examples are Laub (1999), who developed six clusters of servant leadership characteristics, namely valuing people, developing people, building community, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, sharing leadership (Dierendonck 2011); Russell and Stone (2002), who distinguished 9 functional characteristics of servant leadership such having a vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment, and 11 additional characteristics such as communication, credibility, competence, stewardship, visibility, influence, persuasion, listening, encouragement, teaching, and delegation; and Patterson’s (2003) model, which encompasses seven dimensions of leadership, being: love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service.

Having a good bit of overlap between the 44 resulting characteristics, Dierendonck (2011) was able to distill existing models into 6 characteristics: empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship. While this taxonomy is admirable, for the purpose of this model’s leader communication focus developed in this manuscript, Spears (1998) definition of servant leadership (directly derived from Greenleaf’s work and influenced by the combined efforts of Greenleaf and Spears at the Center for Servant Leadership) is more suitable since it encompasses the basic characteristics that the original author had in mind and his taxonomy synthesizes better what a servant leader is.

Based on the literature’s broad taxonomy, critics argue servant leadership is very similar to other forms of leadership, for example, ethical, authentic, charismatic, and spiritual leadership. It is important to define servant leadership by illustrating the difference between it and other leadership styles. Walumbwa et al. (2010) make a clear distinction of how servant leadership differs from the other types of leadership. Servant leadership includes a moral component, which is not present in charismatic and transformational, even though it is included in authentic and ethical leadership. Servant leadership is genuinely concerned with the success of followers (Walumbwa et al. 2010). However, servant leadership does not use manipulative behavior since leaders act in the best interest of the follower; therefore, such leaders do not try to involve followers with the sole purpose of achieving organizational ends, such as would be the case with charismatic and transformational styles (Walumbwa et al. 2010). A very unique characteristic of servant leadership is the practice of self-reflection in order to diminish the arrogance that comes with power, an element that is not practiced in the authentic, ethical, and transformational leadership styles (Walumbwa et al. 2010).

Equally important, several studies have proposed and tested the relationship between servant leadership and subordinates’ outcomes. Some empirical research has found positive relationships between servant leaders and employee commitment, self-efficacy, and organizational citizenship
behavior (Yukl, 2013). Furthermore, Yukl (2013) mentions servant leaders’ concern for the subordinates would yield to an increase in trust, loyalty, commitment and satisfaction with the leader.

**Motivating language**

The manner in which a leader communicates with subordinates affects their motivation (Sullivan 1988). In times when motivational theorists had their focus on uncertainty reducing managerial speech acts, Sullivan (1988) addressed aspects that otherwise had been overlooked. Motivating language, as Sullivan (1998) defines it, is composed of three types of speech acts: uncertainty-reducing and increasing knowledge (perlocutionary or direction giving); reaffirming the subordinate’s sense of self-worth as a human being (illocutionary or empathetic); and facilitating the subordinate’s construction of cognitive schemas (locutionary or meaning making), which then will be used as a guidance to perform his/her job duties in cultural context. Another neglected element addressed by Motivating Language is the variance in the leader communication quality (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2012), for all the previous theories had assumed the communication capabilities of every leader were equivalent. The main purpose of Motivating Language is to “bridge the gap between leader intent and employee outcomes through verbal communication” (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2012).

Direction giving language occurs when the leader engages in clarifying objectives and tasks. In turn, this communication yields improved subordinates’ performance (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2009). It is transmitted through the oral portion of such managerial practices as goal setting, management by objectives, and performance feedback, and it is being used when leaders “clarify priorities, objectives, and rewards” (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2009). Empathetic language involves leaders’ concerns about subordinates. Leaders use empathetic language to praise subordinates’ accomplishments or provide aid and understanding related to their personal frustrations (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2009). Finally, meaning making language takes place when leaders explain the symbolisms of the organizational culture through stories and metaphors. This type of language is crucial during orientation, training phases and times of organizational change (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2009), and is well suited to leadership roles that encourage change through the communication of innovative future goals which involve cultural change (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2012). Three critical assumptions serve as foundations for motivating language theory. 1) Motivating language will increase employee motivation only if leaders words’ match their actions (a term called “walking the talk”); 2) The three types of language are appropriately used in a strategic manner (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2009); lastly 3) Sullivan (1988) hypothesized that motivating language covers almost all forms of leader member speech.

Motivating Language Theory (MLT) proposes that leader communication is significantly linked to subordinates’ outcomes such as performance, turnover, absenteeism, loyalty, and job
satisfaction (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2009). Furthermore, MLT has “has been operationalized into a valid a reliable scale”, and has been tested to show the significantly positive effects that it produces on job satisfaction, subordinates’ communication satisfaction, and perception of leader effectiveness and communication competence (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2009), self-efficacy, performance, retention, attendance, and creativity (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2012, Sharbrough et al., 2006).

**MODEL AND PROPOSITIONS**

We believe there are several characteristics of servant leadership that can be transmitted through the use of motivating language. In other occasions, motivating language can only partially transmit servant leadership behavior. There are also some aspects of servant leadership that are not verbal, these can be personal traits or behaviors, and therefore, motivating language has no impact on them. We will analyze each factor one by one.

For example, Spears (1998) mentions listening is one of the ten characteristics of servant leadership. He defines it as the ability to intently listen receptively to what is being said and what is not being said (Spears, 1998). It is well known that listening is a vital component of communication. However, Zorn and Ruccio (1998) point out that motivating language does not take into consideration the interaction between the communicators, meaning that this is a unilateral communication from the leader to the subordinate. Therefore, motivating language is not expected to have an impact on the listening characteristic. Regardless, ML can readily compliment servant leadership through strategic leader characteristic. Regardless, ML can readily compliment servant leadership through strategic leader responses.

Other characteristics listed by Spears (1998), such awareness, which is the ability to look at situations in a holistic manner; conceptualization, which is thinking “beyond day-to-day realities” (p.5); and foresight, which is anticipating the most likely outcome of a situation by understanding the “lessons of the past, the reality of the present” (p.5) and the future consequences of the decision taken are personal traits, and therefore, do not appear to have a direct link with motivating language. These behavioral components of servant leadership, which are active listening, awareness, conceptualization, and foresight will instill trust among individual employees and groups. As a result, employees will be satisfied with their leader. Ultimately, the leader will inspire employees to become servant leaders themselves.

Similarly, stewardship, which is defined as the responsible management of something entrusted and is characterized by the “commitment to serving the need of others” (Spears 1998, p.5), can be also classified as being a behavioral component of servant leadership. Yet it is only in the presence of communication that stewardship can be transmitted. Stewardship messages sent through motivating language can lead to better worker performance, less absenteeism, and foster worker innovation. Furthermore, empathy is exercised when the leader makes an effort to understand and identify with his/her subordinates, accepting and recognizing them for their
unique characteristics (Spears, 1998). This attribute can be enhanced through the use of empathetic language, which, as mentioned previously, demonstrates concern about subordinates’ well being and can be expressed by praising the subordinate’s achievements or showing compassion for his/her problems. Empathy, expressed through motivating language, can boost worker performance and increase job satisfaction.

Healing behaviors are also transmitted through communication. Healing is the ability to heal one’s self and others and “help make people whole” (Spears 1998, p.4). According to Spears (1998), Greenleaf stated: “there is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between servant leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share” (p.4). The process of healing can be executed through the use of empathetic language. Healing, by using motivating language, can have a positive impact in worker performance, job satisfaction, and reduced absenteeism.

Although commitment to the growth of people (personal, professional, and spiritual growth) is a behavioral component of servant leadership, there is also a communication factor to this commitment. Spears (1998) lists some leaders’ actions that can be used to achieve people’s growth, such as “making available funds for personal and professional development, encouraging worker involvement in the decision making, and actively assisting laid off workers to find other employment” (p.6). These actions can be transmitted through direction giving and meaning making language, and can yield results such as a better worker performance, job satisfaction, and worker innovation.

Building community is yet another attribute that Spears (1998) bestowed on servant leaders. Leaders know the positive impact that local communities have on workers, so it is in the leader’s best interest to build, re-build, and maintain communities. Spears (1998) quotes Greenleaf by saying that “all is needed to rebuild a community as a viable life form for various 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” (p.6). We believe a servant leader can build community through the use of empathetic and meaning making language, and this can result in better worker performance, incremented job satisfaction, and decreased absenteeism.

Finally, servant leaders use persuasion in lieu of relying solely in their authority. Instead of coercion, the servant leader wants to convince others and build consensus among teams (Spears, 1998). This characteristic differentiates servant leadership from other authoritarian leadership models. In order to persuade subordinates, the servant leader can use the three types of motivating language: direction giving, empathetic language, and meaning making, and this can lead to outcomes such as better worker performance and less absenteeism.
TABLE 1

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Servant Leadership Characteristics</th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Non-Verbal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Healing</td>
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<td>Awareness</td>
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<td>Persuasion</td>
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<td>Conceptualization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foresight</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment to the growth of people</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Building community</td>
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For the purpose of developing our model, we divided servant leadership into verbal and non-verbal characteristics in order to integrate motivating language as a mediator. Since motivating language encompasses direction giving, empathetic, and meaning making speech acts, it will only mediate the verbal characteristics of servant leadership. These characteristics are stewardship, empathy, persuasion, healing, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. The servant leadership characteristics that are not mediated by motivating language are listening, awareness, conceptualization, and foresight.

The verbal characteristics of servant leadership, namely stewardship or serving the need of others, empathizing with subordinates, healing and helping make people whole, committing to the growth of people, building community, and using persuasion to direct people (as opposed to relying in personal authority), when channeled through motivating language will produce enhanced outcomes such as better worker performance, job satisfaction, decreased absenteeism and worker innovation. When leaders engage in actions that make subordinates feel that they are more highly regarded, they will be more satisfied with their jobs, will avoid missing work because of the sense of cohesiveness between the leader and the follower. These employees will feel comfortable enough to express their ideas which will in turn foster innovation. We therefore propose the following:

*Proposition 1*: Motivating language will fully mediate servant leader’s actions (verbal characteristics) and subordinate-related outcomes, resulting in set of improved outcomes such as worker performance, job satisfaction, absenteeism, and worker innovation (as shown in the model below).

Furthermore, non-verbal characteristics of servant leadership behavior, such as listening receptively at what is being said and not being said, awareness of the situations,
conceptualization or looking beyond the day to day activities, and anticipating the most likely outcome, should yield positive results such as trust, organizational citizenship behavior, satisfaction with the leader, and inspiration to become servant leaders. This will be achieved through the non-verbal characteristics of servant leadership and not through verbal communication. Through leading by example and making wise choices with the available information, servant leaders will create an environment in which subordinates trust their leader, are satisfied with his/her performance, and are inspired to become servant leaders themselves. Our second proposition goes as follows:

*Proposition 2:* Motivating language will not mediate the non-verbal aspects of servant leadership. Therefore, will only yield to outcomes such as trust and inspiration to become servant leaders.

Lastly, the combination of the verbal characteristics mediated by motivating language and the non-verbal characteristics should result in employee commitment, self-efficacy, and organizational citizenship behavior. The latter have been hypothesized to be influenced by both servant leadership and motivating language. Examples of these leadership characteristics are stewardship and commitment to the growth of people, which both possess verbal and non-verbal components. This bring us to our last proposition:

*Proposition 3:* Motivating language will partially mediate servant leader’s actions (verbal characteristics) and the subordinate-related outcomes, but there will also be an influence of non-verbal servant leadership characteristics, therefore, yielding to the third set of improved subordinate outcomes such as self-efficacy, satisfaction with the leader, organizational citizenship behavior, and employee commitment.
FIGURE 1

IMPLICATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although we believe our model gives a detailed explanation of the positive impact that motivating language has on servant leadership, empirical research needs to be conducted to test this model. This could be done by conducting surveys across organizations and analyzing the data obtained through the use of structural equation modeling, for example. Qualitative analyses and longitudinal studies could also provide better insights of how servant leaders communicate through motivating languages. This could be tested by 3 groups in an organization: one control group, one group with one or two types of ML training, and a group with all forms of ML training. The before and after results could be tracked in order to see the longitudinal results. In addition, multiple models can be designed and tested to evaluate which one holds more statistical power. If our model emerges as the strongest, the positive effects of servant leadership through the use of motivating language could be accomplished in multiple ways. First, potential servant leaders could take the well-established, reliable and valid motivating language scale to
diagnostically identify their leader-member communication strengths and weaknesses (Mayfield, Mayfield, and Kopt, 1995). Then tailored motivating language trainings could be implemented which target motivating language weaknesses and key strategic outcomes in the proposed model. Furthermore, motivating language training would be a valuable instrument for transmission of a servant leadership culture. Certainly, learning is a critical process that Bandura (2008) asserts can change behaviors.

Finally, servant leadership style responds to the demand for positive ethical behavior that is much needed during these times when emphasis has given to profitability, and lack of concern for people is the norm rather than the exception. It is also synchronized with the current benefits of organizational citizenship behaviors that have recently emerged in the field of managerial research. Undoubtedly, more research needs to be conducted to support the positive effects that servant leadership style has in the business environment as well as in societies, and a more comprehensive construct definition needs to be attained. Furthermore, motivating language itself is a powerful tool that servant leaders can use to communicate effectively with their subordinates to increase desirable subordinate attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, testing the effects of servant leadership and motivating language on employees’ outcomes in a complementary model can make beneficial contributions to the management research field as well as to managerial practice.

REFERENCES


