



Servant Leadership: An Emerging Paradigm for Union-Management Relations

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The recession that began in December 2007 has affected every sector of the economy. The private sector has had to make difficult decisions balances the demands of shareholders and their employers. Most organizations are able to make unilateral decisions concerning the terms and conditions of employment. However, unionized organizations must negotiate any changes before they are enacted.

Unionized organizations must address a variety of issues that arise in the workplace which do not exist to the same level in non-union counterparts. Specifically, the union-management relationship within a unionized context may be frequently described as adversarial. The adversarial nature of association between union and management derives from the process in which unions are formed as well as from the collective bargaining process – from development to implementation. At the bargaining table, in which union and management work to reach an agreement on terms and conditions of employment, there are often competing forces at play which cause an adversarial tension. Over the long-term, this tension has the ability to erode trust in the other party, thereby expanding the divide between union and management interests. When trust erodes between the parties, it has the potential to polarize the positions that each party represents, which in turn creates conflict. Each party is concerned with avoiding the perception of appearing weak because of their need to satisfy the goals of their constituents.

A unionized workforce, like all other organizations, requires trust as a means of advancing the overall goals and objectives of the organization. However, in an adversarial environment, the development and maintenance of trust proves difficult. When trust is lacking, it can result in strikes, excessive grievances and arbitrations. This is costly for both the union and the organization. Without trust, both sides may utilize power in an attempt to avoid the appearance of vulnerability in response to the motives and actions of the other party.

Is there a different management paradigm that could be utilized in unionized environments which could transform the union-management relationship from adversarial to cooperative. Servant leadership is a management paradigm, which is emerging throughout literature and in application in various organizations worldwide. Proponents of the servant leadership model state that it has universal applicability across cultures, religions, and organizational models. The servant leadership model fills the void of morality that some suggest exists in other leadership paradigms. The servant leadership

concept, while not explicitly stated, is derived from a Judeo-Christian foundation [1-3], the concept rooted in Jesus Christ's teachings to his disciples that, in order to be a leader, one must be a servant. Building on this foundation, proponents of servant leadership assert that leaders motivated by an intrinsic desire to serve have a positive effect on his/her followers, as well as the organizational health and success [4].

While the collective bargaining process is inherently an adversarial process, there are proponents that suggest the process does not have to remain this way, but instead can be transformed into a cooperative partnership [5,6]. When unions recognize that the organization is interested in the welfare of the employees, as well as the overall organizational health, then the process can become a means in which both parties seek to aid in the success of the other. Recognizing the symbiotic relationship that union and management have to one another and how this relationship affects overall performance can transform the collective bargaining process into an incubator of organizational development, thus moving beyond the traditional discussions of terms and conditions of employment. However, the transformation of the collective bargaining process requires substantive actions, including the demonstration of a willingness to trust the other side and a commitment to demonstrating that it is worthy of trust.

Trust needs to be cultivated before, during, and after the collective bargaining process. Organizations that promote shared sacrifice and shared rewards throughout the structure lend themselves to higher levels of trust in the collective bargaining process [5]. Additionally, Chaison and Plovnick [5] note that the personalities of those involved in the collective bargaining process are also important in generating a collaborative, trusting environment. According to Washington et al. [7] the attributes of a servant leader are directly related to the leader's values and personality. Russell [8] notes that the values of the leader "ultimately influence organizational performance". The values of "care for followers, integrity, and competence are all necessary to foster interpersonal trust – an essential ingredient in servant leadership" [7]. One of the central arguments in favor of servant leadership is that the values of the leader demonstrated through particular attributes will bring about greater trust, which in turn spurs greater productivity and innovation.

Those participating in the collective bargaining process need to have the ability to believe in the sincerity of the other party's claims in order for negotiations to move forward. Olekalns and Smith [6] found that, when there are high levels of trust and optimism, there was a decrease in the use of deception during the negotiations. The foundation of one's ability to ascertain the sincerity of the other is hypothetically correlated to the degree of trust that has been cultivated by each party, which is linked to the values and attributes of the participants.

The servant leadership model may be perceived as a weak form of governance which leaves both the leader and the organization vulnerable to being taken advantage of by employees, stakeholders, and other interest groups. However, servant leadership may have the ability to transform the union-management relationship from

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Received: June 12, 2012 Accepted: June 12, 2012 Published: June 14, 2012

adversarial to cooperative by fostering an environment of trust. As both seek to trust the other side, open communication can occur without hidden agendas. Each side, in trusting the pure motives of the other, is able to seek to achieve broad organizational goals that would benefit both the employee and the employer. Applying the servant leadership paradigm in the workplace may improve the long-term union-management relationship, thereby creating an environment no longer characterized as adversarial, but an environment that fosters teamwork and innovation among parties for the common organizational objectives.

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