

Intrinsic Motivation and Servant Leadership: A Case for Autonomy Supporting Work Environments in the Military

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As military officers, the study of leadership is ubiquitous. Officers' are inculcated in the Air Force vision of leadership when they are still enrolled in their commissioning source, whether Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), Officer Training School (OTS) or a service academy. Leadership is a diverse field of study and one that is continually growing (Woltring, Constantine, & Schwarte, 2003). There are entire schools and degree programs dedicated to the study of leadership. In this article, the authors examine one specific style of leadership: servant leadership. The authors explore the relationship between subordinates' intrinsic motivation and use of servant leadership. In the personal dimensions of interactive organizational relationships, servant leadership plays an important role. If the people are taking care of the mission, the mission will become second nature. "In this form of leadership the leader is moving the follower beyond immediate self-interests and helps elevate the follower's level of maturity and ideals as well as concerns for achievement, self-actualization, and the well-being of others, the organization, and society" (Bass, 1999, p. 25).

Personality measures also were at the core of a study involving military science cadets who were first rated by their instructors and then by their peers and supervisors at the end of a six-week leadership training camp. A leader with a high level of confidence lead to strong performance researchers have concluded, adding that "efficacy and optimism contribute not only to a leader's image of competency but also to actual performance capability in the role" (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000, p. 272). The researchers also found that ratings were consistent when leaders were assessed on their actions in demanding and challenging circumstances. In other words, developing an organization that has leaders with a high level of confidence is at least partly accomplished "through the selection for leadership of individuals with high levels of dispositional confidence and optimism, gained through graduated success experiences that help to build such self-perceptions" (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000, p. 274).

Robert Greenleaf's seminal work on servant leadership has been refined since 1977, but the essence of the theory remains. A servant leader cultivates trust in his employees through ethical use of power. A servant leader trains his replacement. Leaders will inspire, through their unflagging devotion to the people who perform the greater mission, and subordinates to lead in like manner. The subordinates of a servant leader will become increasingly free, wise and autonomous (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf (1977) meanwhile articulated servant leadership in which individuals would not necessarily be required to hold office or a particular leadership position. Rather, by encouraging the cultivation of trust and the ethical use of power, the servant leader views the responsibility of service to the organization as first and then leadership as a means of expanding the organization's capacity to fulfill its core mission and its obligations to its stakeholders. The test of leadership, according to Greenleaf, therefore is to see if followers became "healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" (p. 35).

Northouse (2004) defined servant leadership with "a strong altruistic ethical overtone which emphasizes leaders being attentive to the concerns of their followers; they should take care of them and nurture them and in return they will take care of the leaders." Here the organization holds the leader fully responsible for the follower's outcomes. In fact, the way an individual becomes a leader by first assuming the role of a servant (Northouse). In the servant leadership style, the authority shifts to those who are being led so that the dynamics of power and control, so important to traditional leadership styles, become secondary to the need to strengthen relationships of trust within the organizational hierarchy (Perry & Mankin, 2007). Value and trust in leadership is described similarly by the military and by Greenleaf (1977) and Northouse (2004), with an emphasis on the mutually complementary effects of community support and individual and leadership strength.

The Air Force prides itself on flexibility. A common mantra is “flexibility is the key to air power,” however, Milligan (2003) contends that the maxim deteriorates in real-world leadership practices. Operations tempo continues to increase. Force management measures like the 2010 reduction in force and force shaping were designed to reduce the Air Force’s end strength by 2,074 officers (Elkins, 2009). In addition to the reduction in force, the Air Force must provide its share of Airmen to fight in Iraq, Afghanistan and other forward locations. Though the number of personnel has decreased, there are more jobs to be done. While some of these tasks are delegated to contractors, the hard mathematical truth is: less people plus a greater number of jobs equals more work allotted to each member. Decreased manning has a direct impact on flexibility. Officers are often tasked with multiple programs in addition to their primary duty. In the past, many of these “additional duties” had dedicated members serving as the office of primary responsibility. Apropos to the discussion about increased work: Company Grade Officers have certain expectations levied on them. Among these expectations are completing their Master’s degree, Squadron Officer School in correspondence and residence, maintaining excellent physical conditioning, and volunteering on their base and/or in their local community.

Deci and Ryan (1985) define autonomy orientation as the degree to which a person is predisposed toward an environment where intrinsic motivation is valued, the task is optimally challenging and provides support in the form of feedback. In contrast to a more supportive work environment, Milligan (2003) found controlling leadership styles in the military which tend to discount the value of feedback. Dictatorial leaders can create controlling work situations. Controlling leadership styles depend on an employee’s reliance on external contingencies (e.g. tangible rewards and punishments) (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Controlling leaders continuously monitor followers’ performance, proving the “micro-managerial” cliché (Milligan, 2003).

Autonomy is a state highly correlated to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic motivation is a desirable end state in an employee. An intrinsically motivated employee’s locus of causality is not external to that person; they will work harder because they want to, not because they are being controlled (Burton, Lydon, D’Alessandro, & Koestner, 2006; Cameron, Pierce, Banko, & Gear, 2005; Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Deci, 1972; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Locus of causality refers to the perceived source of a behavior, attitude or control. For example, when an individual is offered a reward for performing to a specific standard, that individual will begin to perform the task in order to receive the reward, not because of any native interest. The shift in the locus of causality from an internal one (i.e. I love my job and I’m going to perform it to the best of my ability) to an external one (i.e. I want to get paid for building x-number of widgets), can be detrimental to motivation and an employee’s sense of self-worth (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989).

Payment for achieving a standard is one example of a contingent reward. Contingent rewards are tangible rewards offered for accomplishing a specific task or meeting a specific goal. When contingent rewards are given over a period of time, the employee will come to feel as if they are performing that task in order to receive a reward or the approval of the organization or individual offering them. That change over time is a shift in the locus of causality. Non-contingent rewards, like verbal praise should be offered to employees (Cameron, Pierce, Banko, & Gear, 2005; Deci, 1972). Interestingly enough, research has shown that verbal praise often has greater positive impact compared to contingent extrinsic rewards (Deci, 1972). When praise is offered in an autonomy supporting environment, intrinsic motivation is increased.

Creating an autonomy supporting environment is a social-dialectical process, one that involves conversation between superior and subordinate. The servant leader embraces the values of the organization and encourages others to do so by example. Successful assimilation of values requires an internal process of self-determination which is inhibited when an environment is controlling (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The process may be an internal one, but developing intrinsic motivation and working toward the mindset of a servant leader requires autonomy. Employees must have the freedom to pursue their intrinsic development aided by an autonomy supporting work environment. Squadron Officer’s School is the Company Grade Officer’s second-level of professional military education. Course 20, Squadron Officer School’s correspondence curriculum explains that motivation is complex and requires that a leader understand and match the requirements of their subordinates, including needs, interests, values, attitudes, incentives, aspiration and fear of failure (Squadron Officer School, 2007).

We propose that a less complex model be applied to motivation; that of self-determination. An individual will become intrinsically motivated naturally in accordance with the self-determination continuum. Individuals move throughout their lives in a consistent approach to self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Choice plays a crucial role in self-determination. Where a person has the ability to choose and high intrinsic motivation, higher achievement is likely (Ewing, 2011).

By creating an autonomy-supporting environment in the workplace, employees will be more likely to develop the type of intrinsic motivation necessary to become self-motivated servant leaders in their own time. Servant leaders embrace the mission of the organization and realize that through work and sacrifice, they will grow employees who are like-minded. It is important to remember that leadership is not a starring role (Vadell, 2010). A leader takes all of the blame and none of the credit. A leader assimilates the goals of the company and work for the betterment of their subordinates so that they may live out their potential in a self-deterministic manner.

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