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WOULD SERVANT LEADERSHIP HELP TO ALLEVIATE THE PROBLEM OF ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE? CURRENT THOUGHTS & REFLECTIONS

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Sometimes silence is mistakenly regarded as something that reflects a peaceful organizational environment where everyone is happy and satisfied. According to related research though, employees in certain organizations might refrain from open communication and sharing of knowledge for the simple purpose of being misregarded as a “problem maker” or of just being ignored by their managers. Silence by the employees represents a largest hurdle for organizational learning, innovation, and change that has a vital role in an organization’s sustainable performance.

In this paper, we are trying to investigate the concept of organizational silence as it relates to leadership, by trying to understand it specifically from the perspective of servant leadership. As to our knowledge, no single study or a theoretical paper has tried to elaborate these two concepts at the same time.

Keywords: *Servant Leadership, Organizational Silence, Silence, Leader-Follower relationship, Servant Leader Characteristics, Trust for the Leader.*

1. Introduction.

Employees are the vital sources underlying an organization’s change, novelty and, most importantly, organization’s health which all have a critical importance in its ongoing success. In this organizational framework, leaders form the most fundamental bridge between the whole organization and his/her employees, in other words, the followers. A leader is no one without his or her followers. He or she can not accomplish any goal without the followers’ support, collaboration, and agreement. In this type of interdependent relationship, the follower fine-tunes his or her attitudes and behaviors according to his/her leaders’ style. Relatedly, when a leader sets the ground for more open communication and discussion, it is more possible for the employees to make meaningful contributions towards organizational goals.

Servant leadership presents a leadership style that involves serving one’s followers’ needs of status, information, resource, support and

development, while holding them responsible of their tasks, methods of work, and related results. In doing that, the servant leader aims to realize certain long and short term goals targeted for the betterment of all. In this process of leadership, the servant leader takes risks, learns from mistakes and criticisms, and shares the successful outcome and rewards with his/her followers (B. Akdöl). [1, 1]

In terms of breaking the organizational silence wall, we are asking whether servant leadership might help. In this type of leadership context, we are assuming that the followers and the leader are together in trying to carry the water up the hill.

2. Servant Leadership.

Robert K. Greenleaf and Larry C. Spears are the first researchers who conducted initial studies on servant leadership. They defined servant leadership as a leadership style that comprises of sharing decision making power, developing the community spirit, enable holistic work approach by mainly focusing on serving the others (B. Akdöl). [1, 19] In a recent study by D. Van Dierendonck, [22, 1232] servant leader was defined as an individual who empowers and improves others, demonstrates humility and authenticity, accepts other humans as they are, works for the good of the whole and holds personal accountability at all times.

2.1 Characteristics of a Servant Leader

Although R. K. Greenleaf coined the term in 1970, it was L. Spears who has made the largest contribution to it. As a result of a series of studies, Spears came up with ten different characteristics that a servant leader holds (L. C. Spears [19]; Ü. Ercan [9, 271-274]; P. G. Northouse [14, 221-223]; Ö. Özdemir, 2015: [15, 59-62]):

- *Listening and Understanding:* A Servant leader prefers to communicate by listening. One of the most important resources underlying his/her achievements is his/her ability to listen. Because he/she listens inwards and outwards, listening is a two way process for him/her. This type of communication process makes it easier for him/her to serve and to discipline his/her team.

- *Empathy:* Servant leader is empathic. Because of this empathic nature, the servant leader is able to perceive his/her followers’ wishes and desires from their own perspectives. In terms the fulfillment of organizational goals, the servant leader can predict the reactions of those who are affected by the process through his/her empathizing role. Because

he/she is aware and understanding of what is going on around, he/she is much more able to demonstrate an effective leadership.

- *Foresight*: Also termed as vision, this term is one of the most important characteristic of the servant leader. A servant leader, by using the information from past and today can predict the eventual repercussions of current decisions.

- *Awareness and Sensation*: Servant leader is aware of his/her own personal qualities and capabilities. On the other hand, follows closely what is happening around and also what is changing in terms of his/her surrounding environment.

- *Persuasion*: The servant leader doesn't use coercive and authoritarian powers. He/she expresses his/her thoughts by communicating with followers directly. He/she mainly sets the stage for an expressive environment where everyone is free to express him/herself. This way the servant leader enables persuasion through convincing the followers of the tasks' down-to-earth nature.

- *Healing*: Servant leader is a pioneer in alleviating problems both inside his own personal world and in terms of the removal of organizational problems. He/she listens to the followers in the name of problem solving, and also spends considerable effort for those solutions. According to Greenleaf (1970), servant leader, while helping to remedy the issues corresponded by his/her followers, also happens to heal his/her own self. In other words, Greenleaf sees it as a two way process.

- *Conceptualization*: Servant leader perceives certain events and situations from a general, rather than a daily perspective meaning that he/she focuses on the big picture. This way he/she can realize organization's long-term goals as he/she is able to solve complex issues in a rather smooth way.

- *Stewardship*: To be able to reach organizational goals, the leader holds certain managerial functions at hand. He/she uses this borrowed leadership role again to serve his/her followers.

- *Dedication to Human Development*: While trying to realize set goals, spends considerable effort for the personal and psychological development of the followers at the same time.

- *Building Community*: Forms small, interdependent harmonious groups among the followers. These groups happen to improve themselves as a result of various interactions amongst themselves.

These ten characteristics put forward by L. Spears very much contributes to the further understanding of Greenleaf's "Servant as a Leader" work.

3. Organizational Silence.

Cicero, a master of rhetoric, regarded as "one of the great artists of conversation" said that "speech is a major form of art" (M. Ephratt). [8, 1911] While communicating by words and expressing ourselves through conversations are important virtues, it is of serious concern why people would not choose to go into dialogues therefore come to agreement around certain important topics inside organizations. What are some of the unwanted consequences of silence for the employee and the organization as a whole? Some of the related answers to these types of questions regarding silence were started to be given since 1970s especially by some significant studies carried out in organizations. The historical outline of these studies can be given in three periods: (C. T. Brinsfield vd [2, 4]; Ā. Durak, [6, 46]):

- a. The birth period; Hirschman study in 1970 entitled: "*Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*" and the following studies till 1980's. In this period of initial studies on silence, verbal communication and silence were treated quite differently by social scientists. However, the most striking realization of the term silence in this period was that it in fact did not reflect any kind of passive behavior and that it was not a sign of any kind of obedience or blind affirmance.
- b. Second period; Covers studies carried out from 1980's till 1990's. The silence literature was expanded by studies about principled organizational dissent, whistle blowing, organizational complaints, social ostracism, and deaf ear syndrome.
- c. Third period; Starts with the studies carried out in 2000 and continues up until today. This period is when E. W. Morrison and F. J. Milliken [13] coined the term "organizational silence" and when many other related studies followed. Employee Silence by C. C. Pinder & K. P. Harlos, [16] Multidimensional Silence and Voice structure by L. Van Dyne et al. [23] and The Reasons of Employees not Speaking Openly study by F. J. Milliken et al. [12] are among the pioneer research to be listed in this period.

Organizational Silence is operationally defined as: Employees consciously and deliberately not expressing their views and/or worries regarding their tasks and related problems with their management (E. W. Morrison ve F. J. Milliken [13, 707]; D. Ürek et al. [21, 125]).

Organizational silence is also defined as withholding one's behavioral, cognitive and affective genuine expressions regarding the organization from

the agents who have the ability or the power to change or fix the causing situation (C. C. Pinder ve K. P. Harlos [16, 334]; I. Durak, [6, 44]). According to A. Çakıcı, [4, 36] organizational silence reflects any form of alternative thought, negative feedback, useful information, and any kind of innovative ideas kept to the employee him or herself, without communicating them to anybody at the level of authority. This type of attitude by the employees is said to negatively impact change and decision making processes inside the organization.

When we oversee these definitions of silence, we come up with two different but related inferences: The first is that the individual employee refrains from taking personal responsibility from changing and therefore alleviating his or her surrounding conditions. The second would be refraining from communicating with those who are capable of remedial or change. In short, the employee, by not expressing, happens to hide problems which in the long run would jeopardize organizational and individual wellbeing.

According to E. W. Morrison ve F. J. Milliken, [12, 1353] the main focus of organizational silence studies would be this: "The type of fear, situation, or factors which might underlie employee's preference for silence". For some researchers, the main reasons for this center around the fear of being punished for disclosing certain unethical organizational practices. In addition, for the purpose of preserving the ongoing consensus, and commitment inside one's group, the employee might be running away from vocalizing certain discords (D. Ürek et al.). [21, 125]

On the other hand, silence has also been regarded as another form of voice. Silence is said to encompass many deep and implicit meanings (I. Durak) [6, 48]. It is up to the managers to correctly decipher the hidden messages delivered under silence. The implicit messages carry out the effective potential for certain employee attitudes and behaviors, several work outcomes, and factors that might negatively or positively affect related organizational change and development (E. Erenler et al.). [11, 3143]

There are three attitudes and behaviors related to employee silence inside organizations: Acquiescent Silence, Defensive Silence and ProSocial Silence (L. Van Dyne et al.). [23, 1363]

Those who hold Acquiescent silence approach accept the current situation as is and do not try to take any initiative in changing it or do not spend any effort to talk openly (A. Çakıcı). [4, 98] In other words, they have a very passive approach in terms of changing their environments.

According to C. C. Pinder ve K. P. Harlos [16] and E. W. Morrison ve F. J. Milliken [13] studies, defensive silence is a deliberate proactive act that involves not being able to express certain thoughts and information related to one's fears of outside threats (L. Van Dyne et al.). [23, 1367] The type of employees who hold this type of silence approach do take a very passive stance in the face of daily events.

ProSocial silence refers to withholding certain ideas, information and thoughts related to work according to others' and organizations' interests (L. Van Dyne et al. [23, 1371]; A. Çakıcı [3, 34]).

4. How Servant Leadership ties to Organizational Silence?

It seems obvious now that the relationships between the leader and employees have a critical influence on the employee's attitudes and behaviors (S. G. Scott and R. A. Bruce [18, 1]; E. Taşkıran [20, 132]). The leaders hold a key role in employees' preference for not speaking openly about certain organizational issues and for remaining silent (A. Çakıcı). [4, 30] If a leader listens, tries to understand, empathizes, takes into consideration their wishes and desires, helps to solve problems and eventually co-acts with them, the followers will feel valuable and eventually will co-act with their leaders. Moreover, the followers will be more inclined to share their genuine thoughts and really be willing to support their leaders in times of organizational setbacks and other kinds of problem situations. In the meantime, the servant leader will be continuing to listen his/her followers' needs, desires, ideas and thoughts.

In general, followers have a general anxiety related to being perceived as an antagonist by their leaders in the case of thought/idea/information sharing. Especially those followers who retaliate have a fear of being punished thus feeling insecure. Extant research demonstrated that servant leadership positively leads to a formation of trust felt for the leader (Ö. Özdemir). [15, 116] According to S. F. Premeaux and A. G. Bedeian, [17] felt trust for the leader leads to followers' open communication behavior (A. Çakıcı). [4, 30] The type of trust that a servant leader forms in his/her followers leads to open sharing of ideas/information/thoughts, and eventually to the breaking of the organizational silence.

Ryan ve Oestreich (1998) argued that even though the employees are being assured that it is safe, they might still be thinking that open communication and participation in organizational discussions do in fact carry certain risks (S. F. Premeaux and A. G. Bedeian). [17, 1537] This way,

organizational silence can be seen as a natural consequence of employees' anxious approach to their organizations. As discussed previously, organizational silence is seen as a big hurdle in front of organizational learning and innovation. Here the servant leader provides an opportunity for an emotional healing and keeping everyone together as a whole (E. C. Duyan and D. Van Dierendonck). [7, 5] In addition, servant leader stresses on oneness, togetherness, and the importance of communities. This type of approach by the servant leader leads to an encouragement of open communication for his/her followers, therefore contributes to organizational healing and development.

According to E. W. Morrison ve F. J. Milliken studies [13, 714] on organizational silence, employees might be thinking that;

- a. It is not worth it to talk openly about organizational problems,
- b. It is dangerous to vocalize one's thoughts and concerns.

Here the servant leader tries to bring out the best in his/her followers thorough one-on-one communication, and tries to delineate their talents, needs, goals and wishes (E. C. Duyan and D. Van Dierendonck). [7, 4] Besides, those most important qualities of a servant leader such as "empathy", "stewardship", "awareness and perception", and "dedication to human growth" (L. C. Spears [19]; P. G. Northouse [14, 221-223]) all have a critical role in the passivization of factors that lead to organizational silence.

There is available research that demonstrates the influential role of a local culture on the organizational silence behavior (M. Demir and Ş. Demir). [5, 195] In this type of framework, one might infer that a certain organizational silence behaviors by followers in an organization closely relates to the organizational culture (E. Yaman and K. Ruçlar). [24, 48] The servant leader who owns the philosophies of "considering others first" and "holding a serving focus", helps to reinforce an organizational culture which is shaped by servant leadership principles through the communication skills that he/she has (O. Erdem and A. M. Dikici). [10, 211]

By demonstrating his/her "stewardship and service", "dedication to human growth", and "community building" qualities, the servant leader forms a participative and open organizational culture. This way, he/she happens to prevent the formation of organizational silence among the followers. If the servant leader continues with this behavioral approach long enough, an organizational culture is formed where there is a desired environment with no silence, and especially there is an opposition to silence, and an ideal culture which enables optimum utilization of diverse human resources potential.

5. Concluding Remarks and Suggestions

The available research demonstrated that the application of servant leadership among followers enables formation of trust for the leader. Moreover, it adds to the construction of a participative and open organizational structure. In this context, for the treatment of organizational silence, servant leadership can be suggested as a helping agent.

As we can see from above discussions, the factors underlying the formation of organizational silence climate and of the breaking of the organizational silence wall were not adequately studied in light of available leadership theories. For future studies, it is recommended that the relationship between organizational silence and servant leadership can be further explored by using empirical methods, while helping to inform policy makers and managers by contributing to possible solutions inside the organizations.

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ЧИ ЗМОЖЕ ЛІДЕРСТВО-СЛУЖІННЯ ПОЛЕГШИТИ ВИРІШЕННЯ ПРОБЛЕМИ ОРГАНІЗАЦІЙНОГО МОВЧАННЯ? ІСНУЮЧІ ДУМКИ І РОЗДУМИ

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Іноді мовчання помилково розглядається як щось, що відображає мирне організаційне середовище, де всі щасливі і задоволені. Аналіз результатів відповідних досліджень свідчить про те, що працівники в деяких організаціях можуть утримуватися від відкритого спілкування і обміну знаннями з тієї простої причини, щоб їх не вважали «тим, хто створює проблеми» або просто ігнорували їх менеджерів. Мовчання співробітників є найбільшим бар'єром для організаційного навчання, інновацій та змін, які відіграють життєво важливу роль у забезпеченні сталої діяльності організації.

У даній статті ми намагаємося дослідити концепцію організаційного мовчання, яке воно має відношення до керівництва, розглядаючи його саме з точки зору лідерства-служіння. Як нам відомо, у жодному дослідженні або теоретичній роботі не було здійснено спроб надати характеристику цим двом поняттям одночасно.

***Ключові слова:** лідерство-служіння, організаційне мовчання, відносини керівник-підлеглий, характеристики лідера-служителя, довіра лідеру.*

СМОЖЕТ ЛИ ЛИДЕРСТВО-СЛУЖЕНИЕ ОБЛЕГЧИТЬ РЕШЕНИЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ ОРГАНИЗАЦИОННОГО МОЛЧАНИЯ? БЫТУЮЩИЕ МНЕНИЯ И РАЗМЫШЛЕНИЯ

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Иногда молчание ошибочно рассматривается как нечто, что отражает мирную организационную среду, где все счастливы и довольны. Анализ результатов соответствующих исследований свидетельствует о том, что

работники в некоторых организациях могут воздерживаться от открытого общения и обмена знаниями по той простой причине, чтобы их не считали «тем, кто создает проблемы» или просто игнорировали их менеджеры. Молчание сотрудников является крупнейшим барьером для организационного обучения, инноваций и изменений, которые играют жизненно важную роль в обеспечении устойчивой деятельности организации.

В данной статье мы пытаемся исследовать концепцию организационного молчания, какое оно имеет отношение к руководству, рассматривая ее именно с точки зрения лидерства-служения. Насколько нам известно, ни в одном исследовании или теоретической работе не было осуществлено попыток дать характеристику этих двух понятий одновременно.

Ключевые слова: лидерство-служение, организационное молчание, отношения руководитель-подчиненный, характеристики лидера-служителя, доверие лидеру.

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