# A Call for a Leadership Style Change in Ethiopian Higher Education

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**Abstract:** *This article argues for the need to consider servant leadership style in Ethiopian higher education institutions. In comparative perspectives, it describes how the current higher education leadership style differs from the servant leadership style as the best leadership style for Ethiopian higher education institutions. In the description, selected leadership characteristics are used as the basis for the comparison between the present leadership style and what it should be. Observation and interviews with selected lecturers and leaders of Ethiopian higher education together with a review of related literature are used as data sources.*

## Introduction

The style of leadership in a number of the Ethiopian higher education institutions currently faces challenges due to the dynamic and complex social, political, economic and technological changes. These changes put into question the responsiveness of the current leadership style in Ethiopian higher education institutions that focuses heavily on processes and outcomes. This practice in both older and newer higher education institutions in Ethiopia is alleged to be ineffective to handle the required new competencies – social, emotional and spiritual capitals. To this end, there should be a call for alternative leadership style that emphasizes the people and the future. To address the current higher education leadership challenges, leaders of the sector should adopt their leadership guiding theory to the one that best answers the following questions:

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- How to develop workers and unleash their creative potentials,
- How to create a positive workplace that will attract and retain talented knowledge workers, and
- How to reinforce innovations and risk-taking to adapt to an uncertain future (Wong and Davey, 2007, p. 1).

Servant leadership which was initiated by Greenleaf (1977) and later developed by other scholars such as Spears (1994), and Spears and Lawrence (2004) as cited in Wong and Davey (2007) reveals the important characteristics higher education leaders need to adapt to address the aforementioned challenges.

The first characteristics is listening skill which higher education leaders should use to understand their academic and administrative staff needs, wants, and concerns. This also includes listening to self and reflection. Empathy is also another quality of servant higher education leaders in which they show a real effort and interest to understand their followers' feelings and thinking. It is also a way to recognize the input and unique quality of subordinates. What is more, it is not uncommon to find followers coming with their personal problems to work but servant higher education leaders do all they can to support followers solve their problems. So they are also healers.  Greenleaf quoted in Northouse (2013, p. 222) argues, "The process of healing is a two-way street – in helping followers become whole, servant leaders are healed." In addition, servant higher education leaders have general awareness about the different issues surrounding their university and also about themselves. As a result, they are capable of viewing things holistically. According to Greenleaf (1977) as quoted in Spears (2010, p. 27) "Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able [higher education] leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity." Unlike using authority and power to seek agreement, servant higher education leaders use their

skill of communication to convince their followers in a non-judgmental way. Thus, through persuasion, servant higher education leaders reach into consensus to implement decisions and effect changes. As opposed to traditional higher education leaders who are mainly concerned with the routine activities of their universities, servant higher education leaders are able to conceptualize their vision and directions. Conceptualizations, thus, help leaders address complex situations innovatively and keep them meet their long term goals. Foresight is the other characteristics of servant higher education leaders. It deals with the leaders' skill to predict the future based on the present and past experiences. Stewardship which is accepting accountability to effectively lead the subordinates and the organization is also expected from such a leader. Servant higher education leadership is also characterized by its commitment to the growth of followers and builds a community (Spears, 2010; Northouse, 2013).

Welch (2001) as cited in Wong & Davey (2007, p. 2) asserted that "leadership is 75 percent about people, and 25 percent about everything else. However, the most common weakness among higher education leaders in Ethiopia is their inability to work with people." It is this issue that servant higher education leaders whose practices are grounded on ethics, democracy, trust, hope, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people and building community (Northouse, 2013) address more than other leaders who implicitly or explicitly give less value to their followers.

The data for this reflective paper were gathered from unstructured interviews held with conveniently selected Ethiopian higher education faculties and leaders. All of the study participants had worked in at least three or more higher education institutions in Ethiopia as part-timers and/or full-timers for over 10 years. Retrospective observation of the author was also used to reflect on some issues. Besides, relevant literature was consulted.

## Results and Discussions

*Is a servant leader powerless?*

One of my interviewees who was a vice president in one of the Ethiopian higher education institutions contended that servant leadership does not lend itself to give strong command, make tough decisions and control. He added that such leaders face challenges to get work done efficiently because followers perceive them as soft leaders. According to Northouse (2013), those who hold this view are mostly dictators who do not want to listen to others' needs, opinions and interests. They lack the humility that both leaders and followers equally need one another to achieve their shared vision. It should also be noted that transformation of a higher education institution might be initiated both from the lowest as well as the highest levels of the institution including students even though implementation is usually facilitated top down. Research has also shown that there is an agreement among leadership scholars that leadership should focus on empowering as opposed to commanding and controlling followers as autocratic leadership does (Avolio, 1999).

Power for servant higher education leaders is an avenue to generate service to others and is freely given and shared rather than positioning oneself for command and order (Eber, 2011). The power of servant higher education leaders comes as they serve others and from the trust and respect they get from their followers through the support they give and their focus on developing and growing their followers. Unlike exercising power on workers to do what leaders prescribe, the most effective way of achieving results is to regard the fact that academic and administrative staff have independent minds, each with a great potential to contribute towards a common goal. Thus, the facilitation role a servant higher education leader plays is more powerful than an authoritative role to connect and exploit the unique minds of the followers for the work place (Wong & Davey, 2007).

*Vision creation*

Similar to Eber (2011), a former assistant dean of the Institute of Language Studies in one of the oldest universities in Ethiopia strongly argued that leaders need to come up with a preconceived vision when they commence their leadership role and they should first persuade their followers to accept their vision that guide their future. Even though servant higher education leaders have clear visions for their universities, they understand that unidirectional approach to creating vision would not be effective to appeal to the heart, mind and spirit of followers who are key players in achieving the vision. Thus, they should employ a participatory approach to create a shared vision based on their mission and influence a transformation or reform in their policies, structures, strategies, and culture. That way they create a vision which is "neither a grand illusion nor abstract ideal" (Wong & Davey, 2007).

*A Proven Guiding Leadership Philosophy*

Some leaders like the vice president mentioned above undervalue the prominence of servant leadership for their university because of the possible semantic noise the phrase 'servant leadership' creates. The name implies to them opposite meaning which is a leader being a follower and this is contrary to what they believe a leader is. As a result, they do not have the confidence to use it. They would rather consider this philosophy as imaginary and farfetched. However, many organizations, not necessarily Christian organizations, have shown success by adopting servant leadership as their guiding philosophy (Northouse, 2013).

*Effective Competitive Advantage*

These days, competition is an unavoidable reality among higher education institutions. Thus, higher education leaders do whatever they can to increase the quality of the services and productivity of their university. In achieving this, some leaders try to excel their competitors by prioritizing other competitive advantages rather than their teaching and administrative staff such as buying best facilities, equipment, technologies and even chasing other higher education institutions for fame or financial gains. However, if these leaders do not embrace the principle of servant higher education leadership, they face difficulty to prioritize the true competitive advantage- — "the people who bring their skills, personalities, talents, innovative ideas and desire to be part of something bigger than themselves" (Richard, 2014). Servant higher education leaders know how to cultivate their academic as well as administrative staff's talent, set expectations, make them use all the possible ways to bring competitive advantages to and make them accountable to the outcome of their university. A true competitive advantage in higher education can be gained when leaders full heartedly focus their leadership more on serving, empowering, and trusting followers who are the engine of the university than give inflated focus on the other work variables (Wong & Davey, 2007).

*Decision making process*

Autocratic academic leaders believe that the participatory decision making process servant academic leaders follow does not only leave them without position regarding an issue or event but it also forbids them to pass tough and unpopular decisions even when their university calls for that (Eber, 2011). This gives values to top down decision making process which disregards the voices of followers. According to the observation of a former lecturer in one of the leading higher education institutions in Ethiopia, several deans follow top down decision making which includes arbitrariness and coercive tactics. The

respondent believes that this approach worsens resignation of the best minds of the university. However, effective decision making process characterizes the activities of the democratic servant higher education leader. These leaders are skilled in approaching tough situations by consulting varied sources, presenting convincing reasons, listening to others' opinions, and assuming full responsibility for their decisions. Richard (2014) asserts that when leaders cultivate respect, responsibility, accountability and shared decision-making, there is no need to depend on 'autocratic hierarchies'.

## Achieving Great Results

There are some people who consider servant higher education leaders as following an ambitious theory which may not be effective for successful task implementation. Admittedly, servant leaders are ambitious but their ambition is focused on their mission rather than on themselves (Richard, 2014). They are intrinsically motivated by the vision, mission and value of their university and this is also revealed by their exemplary practices which are free from self-serving interests. The deep and genuine interest of servant leaders to give and serve intrinsically motivates and inspires followers to efficiently and effectively work hard, freely give and extensively serve others. Research has shown that followers' intrinsic motivation and inspiration for a shared mission significantly brings about great results (Wong & Davey, 2007).

## Who Does Not Want Job Security?

In this competitive world, higher education leaders may decide to reform, restructure or merge their activities. In this process, most higher education leaders who use traditional leadership styles focus on their university at the expense of the interests of their academic and administrative staff. Thus, they shuffle, layoff, and even fire their employees without carefully considering how such decisions may affect the lives and performances of their followers. However, dedicated

servant higher education leaders always make such kind of changes less stressful since such leaders have the ability to stand in the shoes of their followers and feel what others feel (Northouse, 2003). They know the way to make followers to be hopeful in difficult times while recognizing the reality of their universities (Wong & Davey, 2007). Moreover, servant higher education leaders believe that the well-being of followers will heal and satisfy them. Thus, they show optimism and faith that good things will prevail over bad things and persistence leads to success. Since followers of servant higher education leaders know that their leaders do all the possible things to help their subordinates by making the transition so smooth that the subordinates would feel working for such leaders brings more job security than working for autocratic leaders.

## Listen Attentively and Responsively

Observation shows that there are Ethiopian higher education leaders who do not pay attention to their subordinates' views, questions, suggestions and concerns. This, among others, seems to have resulted in problems and failures in many organizations. However, servant higher education leaders who are characterized by attentive and responsive listening devote enough amount of time to listen and appreciate everybody's ideas (Spears, 2010; Northouse, 2003). Their communication is primarily done by listening and they use their capable subordinates as important resources to avoid obstacles, bring innovative ideas, solve problems, and provide constructive criticisms. Unquestionably, this characteristics of servant higher education leadership makes a university not only democratic but also healthy. On the other hand, universities that do not listen are likely not to be effective.

*Ego*

Again observation shows that there are some higher education leaders who internally believe that they are and they should be the all-knowing persons. They do not want to make mistakes and if they do, they neither accept nor expose it. In many cases, they defend themselves to satisfy their ego or to externalize the causes of the problems (Wong & Davey, 2007). As opposed to this kind of leaders, servant higher education leaders produce incredible results through the efforts of their team by consciously controlling their unhealthy ego which is a significant barrier to team work. Servant higher education leaders are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and they also recognize that everybody in their team has a potential to contribute something better than the leader (Northouse, 2003). They also know that there are some members who are less skilled to accomplish tasks but they do not pick on them to witness their superiority. They rather support and empower them as well as create a psychologically safe working environment which encourages exploration of ideas and practices. Servant higher education leaders are careful in not letting their ego damage the dynamics of a group work, interaction, communication, innovation and decision making. Those organizations which are suffering from the leadership of ego centric leaders who base their decisions on their selfish needs become liable to the ineffective results of their organization unless they find leaders who are aware of the influence of their ego to others (Richard, 2014).

*Are Servant Leaders Selfless or Humble?*

Some people argue that if a higher education leader prefers to use servant leadership theory, he/she has to be selfless and who down plays his/her personal interests which are impossible in real life. This, however, is a misconception since servant leaders are neither selfless nor selfish. They are rather humble who accommodate their needs and wants while they consciously and effortlessly attend to the needs and interests of their followers (Eber, 2011).

*The Compatibility of Servant Leadership to Other Leadership Theories*

The availability of different leadership theories clearly portrays the wide variety of choices higher education leaders may have. However, in practice it is almost impossible for a higher education leader to adopt one particular type of leadership theory. As a result, wise university leaders are eclectic in their selection. The compatibility of servant leadership to other leadership theories does not only make the inclusion of its principles to other theories relevant but also offer complimentary services to others for great results.

For instance, both transformational and servant leadership theories share many communalities. As a result, there are some writers who do not even see significant differences between the two. Others also support this understanding by claiming that the differences between the two theories do not create conflicts in their underlining principles if the two theories are merged (Echols, 2009). Reacting to this position, Washington (2007, p 38) pointed out that this understanding "may stem from the thought that both theories describe people-orientated, moral, and inspirational approaches to leadership…that emphasize the importance of valuing, mentoring, and empowering followers". Bass (2008) also acknowledges this by saying both are closely related in their inspirational and individualized considerations. Considering the use and emphasis of power in both theories, Block (1993) confirmed that both are related to steward leadership.

Similarly, servant and authentic leadership theories share similar characteristics. Both of them have sincere interest to serve and empower their followers. They focus on personal and professional integrity and give important value to the relationship that exists between leaders and followers as well as among followers (Echols,

2009; Northouse, 2013).   Both use subordinates' weaknesses as opportunity to support and empower them rather than to penalize them. Building on followers' strengths and motivating them are also the other areas of similarities. Trust, courage and hope can also be added to that list (Echols, 2009).

Again a research that investigated the correlation between the dimensions of servant leadership such as altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organizational leadership and the Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory showed strong relationship (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Thus, this implies that if leaders make the best use of the servant leadership dimensions, they would have quality exchanges with their followers and this contributes towards achieving their common goals.

As exemplified above, servant leadership can be compatible with other leadership theories and is readily available for eclectic higher education leaders who want to significantly improve their leadership styles.

## Conclusion

Adopting a leadership style founded on these characteristics in Ethiopian higher education means saving several academic and administrative staff who may be adversely affected, among other things, by incompetence, corruption, unfairness, undemocratic and abusive leadership. It also means eradicating poisonous energies. Specifically, the way servant higher education leadership shapes the notion of power and vision creation, its strong philosophical foundation, competitive advantage, and decision making process, its sensitivity to job security, followers' emotions and differing views, its conviction in empowerment and participation, as well as its compatibility to other theories are just few examples that justify its appropriateness as a style of leadership in Ethiopian higher education institutions.

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