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Servant leadership and conflict resolution: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the present study was to examine the choice of conflict management strategies made by servant leaders.

Design/methodology/approach – The present qualitative study uses the method of narrative enquiry within the framework of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith *et al.*, 2009) to capture the life experiences as lived.

Findings – The study suggests that the servant leaders manifest conflict management styles which are more persuasive, humane and participative. Their chief strategies for resolving subordinate-subordinate conflict are initial diagnosis of the situation; leader's intervention in facilitating an amicable solution; and impartiality of the leader while effecting resolution of conflict. Diagnosis of the conflict situation, self-restraint, patience, composure and humility of the servant leader have emerged as major leadership characteristics, as well as strategies for dealing with any provocative employee behavior.

Practical implications – Insight provided by this study into alternate strategies for conflict resolution will guide the academicians, working managers and trainers to understand and practice the process of managing conflict in a more humane way.

Originality/value – Despite the presence of a few studies linking leadership style with the choice of conflict resolution strategies, an important gap till now has been the absence of leaders' personal account of their experiences, reflections and analysis in their choice of conflict resolution strategies. This study seeks to investigate the approach of servant leaders when they handle subordinate-subordinate and superior-subordinate conflict.

Keywords Servant leadership, Narrative inquiry, Conflict resolution strategies, Interpretative phenomenological approach., Subordinate-subordinate conflict, Superior-subordinate conflict

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Conflict is natural. The onus of managing the conflict between members of an organization may often be on the leader of the organization who could intervene to check its escalation into formal dispute, reduce it to the level of being least damaging, resolve it to facilitate cordial interpersonal relations or harness it as the primary strength of the

groups and teams to enhance organizational effectiveness. How the leader/manager will actually manage the conflict may be determined by his/her leadership orientation or leadership style. Support for this contention can be traced in conflict management research which has primarily focused on the interaction of conflict-situation and person-situation (Knapp *et al.*, 1988). Different individuals may select different conflict management styles depending on their personality, beliefs, values, behavioral orientation and various contextual factors. Benardin and Alvaras (1976) and Zafar (2011) reported that managers with different management styles manage conflict differently.

Various scholars have tried to measure peoples' conflict management styles using a variety of classifications. Deutsch (1949) conceptualized conflict as a simple cooperation-competition dichotomy which drew criticism from various researchers for its simplicity (Ruble and Thomas, 1976; Smith, 1987). As a result, Blake and Mouton (1964) developed a new two-dimensional grid for classifying conflict management styles which again triggered a volley of proposals for revision in his framework. Thomas and Kilmann (1974) suggested a two-dimensional framework comprising five predominant modes of managing conflict. These five modes, derived from the two dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness, were: avoiding; competing; accommodating; compromising and collaborating. Another conceptualization of conflict management style was given by Rahim and Bonoma (1979). They proposed two dimensions for differentiating various styles for resolving conflict: concern for self and concern for others.

Persons having "concern for self" will tend to satisfy their own concerns while resolving the conflict. On the other hand, persons having "concern for others" will be more inclined to satisfy the needs and concern of others in their effort to resolve conflict (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979). When combined, these two dimensions result in five specific styles of conflict management – integrating, dominating, obliging, avoiding and compromising. The integrating styles involve a balance of high concern for others and high concern for self. Avoiding style, on the other hand, is characterized by low concern for others and for self. A dominating style involves low concern for others and high concern for self, whereas an obliging style involves high concern for others and low concern for self. Compromising style is characterized by an intermediate concern for others and for self (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979).

All the above conflict resolution frameworks are based on the premise that conflict is negative in nature, which is resolved by different types of leaders in different ways to prevent its escalation into formal dispute. Galtung (1996), on the other hand, proposed an alternative hypothesis regarding "neutrality" of conflict, wherein he suggested that conflict is neither positive nor negative. Conflict, according to him, can and should be resolved through peaceful means.

Galtung (1996), postulated structural, cultural and behavioral attributes of conflict resolution. To bring peace, we need to address all three attributes. This at times becomes difficult. For example, as suggested by Galtung, the non-state system, being devoid of structural power, may be unable to use this power while handling violence.

Another hypothesis proposed by Galtung (1996) was that analogous to restoration of health, restoration of peace (or resolution of conflict) is dependent on the tripod of "diagnosis–prognosis-therapy". Debate, discussion, open channels of communication, etc. are the part of this tripod while resolving a conflict.

Galtung's belief that conflicts can be resolved through peaceful means may be concretized by the servant leaders' approach toward conflict resolution. In the present study, it was assumed that servant leaders with their components of listening, service, persuasion, appreciation for others, healing, honesty and integrity, etc. are likely to adopt conflict resolution techniques which may be more peaceful, persuasive and humane than what has been theorized in conventional literature.

The present qualitative study is an attempt to find out whether this assumption holds true. However, before describing our study, we will discuss why servant leadership (SL) model has been selected over other value-laden leadership models such as spiritual leadership, authentic leadership, transformational leadership, etc. for this study. A summarized comparison of SL model with other leadership models has been given for bringing out points of similarity and dissimilarity between SL model and other leadership models. The comparison will help us to identify some SL dimensions which could presumably be more congenial for management of conflict.

Transformational leadership and servant leadership
Although the concept of transformational leadership proposed by Bass (1985) and the concept of SL proposed by Greenleaf (1977) emphasize the "facilitating role" of a leader in elevating and empowering followers, the distinction between the two approaches is that whereas a servant leader is motivated by the need to serve the followers (Luthans and Avolio, 2003), "there is nothing in the transformational leadership model that says leaders should serve followers for the good of followers (Graham, 1991). The transformational leader is motivated by the end goals of the organization, and his/her role is to inspire the followers to pursue organizational goals (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006). The priorities set by servant leaders, on the other hand, are followers first, organizations second and their own needs last (Graham, 1991).

According to Smith *et al.* (2004):

[…] servant leadership stresses a leader's concern for followers' wellbeing reflected in receptive, non-judgmental listening and willingness to learn from others. These behaviors are not accounted for by any behavior in transformational leadership model.

Authentic leadership and servant leadership
Avolio *et al.* (2004) and Gardner *et al.* (2005) suggest that authentic leaders are characterized by a positive outlook and a deep awareness of their own and others values and perspectives and the context in which they operate. Servant leaders share many behavioral dimensions characterizing authentic leadership. But what distinguishes servant leaders from an authentic leader is their stronger emphasis on spiritual orientation, which again, according to Sendjaya *et al.* (2008), is an important source of motivation for servant leaders. Servant leaders' spiritual orientation helps them to engage the followers in authentic and profound ways so that they are transformed and become what they are capable of becoming (Sendjaya *et al.*, 2008).

Spiritual leadership and servant leadership
Spiritual leadership comprises "the values, attitudes and behaviors that are necessary to intrinsically motivate oneself and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership" (Fry (2003)). A spiritual leader, according to Fry (2003), tries to:

[…] create a sense of fusion among the four fundamental forces of human existence (body, mind, heart and spirit) so that people are motivated to high performance, have increased organizational commitment, and personally experience joy, peace and serenity.

The three qualities of spiritual leader – vision, altruistic love and hope/faith – have been conceptually or empirically associated with SL as well. Buchen (1998), Farling *et al.* (1999) and Russell and Stone (2002) have documented the importance of vision for SL. However, what differentiates SL from spiritual leadership is the existence of behavioral dimension of self-sacrificial servant hood (Greenleaf, 1970). Moreover, the SL literature does not mention the attainment of joy, peace and serenity as goals of SL. However, inner calling and membership seem to be inherent in SL behavior. The sense of inner calling and meaning may drive servant leaders to assist others to develop these values (Sendjaya *et al.*, 2008), whereas the sense of membership may manifest itself in servant leaders' aspiration to foster leader-follower relationships, which are characterized by mutual trust, shared values, open-ended commitment and concern for the welfare of the other party (De Pree, 1989).

Servant leadership
SL model not only manifests various dimensions of other value- laden leadership models but also extends these models by manifesting other pro-follower characteristics such as motivation to serve, persuasive approach, humility, care and concern for followers, ensuring followers' development, listening, sharing in decision-making and promoting a sense of community, etc.

Based on their comparison of SL with other ethical leadership styles, Sendjaya *et al.* (2008) proposed a holistic model of SL that incorporates spiritual, moral, service and follower-oriented dimensions of leadership. This model, according to them, "is sorely needed in current organizational context".

As already mentioned, the present study also assumed that the servant leaders, with their follower-oriented and service-oriented behavioral dimensions, could prove to be more humane and participative in their conflict management style. If this assumption holds true, servant leaders could be an answer to the rising conflicts, incivility and bullying, etc. in the organizations.

However, before investigating the relationship between SL style and conflict resolution, a thorough understanding of various behavioral dimensions of SL, as conceptualized and empirically studied by researchers, is essential.

The central focus of SL on the development of followers distinguishes it from other forms of leadership (Ehrhart, 2004; Russell and Stone, 2002; Smith *et al.*, 2004). Servant leaders influence their followers, actively understand and practice behavior that places the good of followers over their own self-interest and place emphasis on the development of followers rather than their own gratification (Hale and Fields, 2007; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010). Some other researchers, such as Block, (1993), Briner and Pritchard (1998), Covey (1990), Kouzes and Posner (1993) and Turner (2000), also emphasized the orientation of service as the prime motivation for a servant leader. The servant leader assumes the position of a servant while relating with his/her fellow workers and, according to Ehrhart (2004), "feels a moral responsibility to bring success to the organization, the subordinates, the customers and other stake holders". Graham (1991) suggests that SL adds the component of social responsibility to the concept of transformational leadership.

According to Greenleaf (1977), "going beyond one's self-interest" and serving the followers is the core characteristic of SL. Luthans and Avolio (2003) emphasized that the servant leader creates opportunity within the organization to help followers grow. Supporting Greenleaf (1977), Luthans and Avolio (2003) also indicated that a servant leader is motivated by the need to serve, a need more important than the need for power for him. A servant leader's need to serve has three pronged effect – the growth of individual employee, the survival of the organization and the service of the community (Reinke, 2004). Power becomes a tool to serve others. As Dirk Van Dierendonck (2011) puts it, "being a servant allows a person to lead; being a leader implies a person to serve".

Various researches such as Spears (1995), Laub (1999), Russell and Stone (2002) and Patterson (2003) developed their models of SL in an attempt to delineate the concept introduced by Greenleaf (1977).

Spears (1995), CEO of Greenleaf center, concluded that Greenleaf's (1977) writings incorporated ten major attributes of SL. These attributes/characteristics are as follows:

(1) listening;

(2) empathy;

(3) healing;

(4) awareness;

(5) persuasion, i.e. seeking to influence others through arguments not through positional power;

(6) conceptualization i.e. thinking beyond today's needs;

(7) foresight;

(8) commitment to growth of people;

(9) stewardship; and

(10) building community, i.e. emphasizing the importance of community in a person's life.

Various variations have been introduced to these ten characteristics. Russell and Stone (2002) presented one of the most extensive models and suggested 9 functional and 11 additional characteristics of SL. Patterson (2003), on the other hand, suggested a model of SL characteristics along seven dimensions. Another model presented by Laub (1999) was based on an extensive review of literature. This model suggested six clusters of SL characteristics.

Drawing upon different models of SL characteristics, Dirk Van Dierendonck (2011) enumerated 44 characteristics of SL, though he reported an overlap among these characteristics. Based on thorough analysis of various models and empirical evidence, Dirk Van Dierendonck (2011) distinguished six key characteristics of SL behavior:

(1) empowering and developing people;

(2) humility;

(3) authenticity;

(4) providing direction to people;

(5) accepting people as they are; and

(6) stewardship.

He suggests that all these behaviors/characteristics of SL have an undercurrent of SL's need to serve, and her/his focus on followers' personal growth takes precedence over organizational outcomes. However, the organization benefits automatically when the SL awakens, engages and develops the employees.

Besides, the characteristics and behavior patterns of servant leader can also impact the culture of the organization. There is a growing research evidence that exposure to leaders' virtuous behaviors such as compassion, gratitude, forgiveness and benevolence can give rise to an organizational culture of civility and collaboration, cohesion and commitment, compassion and forgiveness. The life-giving positive culture can impact employee development, employee engagement and commitment and, in turn, organizational success. Podsakoff *et al.* (2009) confirm the above assertion by reporting an association between organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and employee performance, organizational productivity, efficiency and customer satisfaction. In the light of above evidence, business organizations are increasingly focusing on "human" side of management and are looking for leaders who can steer their organizations by adopting positive leadership style.

It will, therefore, be useful to investigate whether servant leaders manifest various positive behavioral characteristics and patterns while attempting to resolve subordinate-subordinate and superior-subordinate conflict. Deciphering the existence of such behavioral characteristics and patterns in servant leaders is important because their existence in leaders makes it likely that a culture of forgiveness, compassion and positivity may emerge in the organization.

A relationship between leadership characteristics, behavior and value orientations and emergence of positive organizations has already been suggested by a few researchers. For example, Karakas and Sarigollu (2013) proposed a link between four elements of benevolent leadership, namely, spiritual depth, ethical sensitivity, positive engagement and community responsiveness and the emergence of virtuous and compassionate organizations. Bennis (1997) suggested that leaders who want to bring a positive change in the organization most often use "value power", i.e. they represent and transmit admirable values. Sharma and Jit (2014) have also postulated a relationship between attributes and value orientations of relational and servant leaders and emergence of a forgiving organization.

Another contribution of the present study will be to the advancement of existing literature on leadership and conflict management by understanding and discovering the conflict resolution strategies adopted by servant leaders. The study has adopted the narrative analysis approach within the framework of interpretative phenomenological analysis to capture the life experiences as lived.

Insight provided by this study into alternate strategies for conflict resolution will guide the academicians, working managers and trainers to understand and practice the process of managing conflict in such a way that culture of compassion, benevolence and forgiveness will emerge and sustain for the long-lasting health and growth of the organization.

Methodology
In the present study, the method of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004) has been used to discover the deep values and perspectives of servant leaders and they interact with their subordinates in the context of conflict

situation. The method of narrative inquiry often uses stories, conversations, interviews, life experiences, field notes, journals, autobiographies, photos, etc. as sources of data (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

In the present study, semi-structured interviews were used to explore and gather experiential data. The aim of the researchers was to capture immediate pre-reflective consciousness of the participant as his/her self-given awareness that belongs to and is processed by the participant rather than as something which is based on his/her perception and thus existing apart from "self" (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2013).

By using narrative inquiry as a technique of investigation, we examine the themes that emerge in the narratives of life experiences as lived by the respondents. SL has been used as a theoretical framework to identify emergence of virtues of humility, empathy, humane approach, patience and composure, etc. We are not following the grounded theory approach because framework of SL already exists. However, because there is no previous literature or theory on our area of investigation we have not framed any hypothesis.

We conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with leaders in education sector, corporate sector and public (government) sector. The respondents with an orientation for SL were identified based on the feedback from present and past subordinates and colleagues of leaders. The feedback was derived from in-depth interviews of leaders' present and past subordinates and colleagues. Eight-ten subordinates and colleagues of each leader were interviewed. Interview questions were based on five key dimensions of SL, as identified by Reed *et al.* (2011) in their Executive Servant Leadership Scale (ESLS). These dimensions are interpersonal support; building community; altruism; egalitarianism; and moral integrity. These dimensions are comprehensive, exhaustive and robust, both conceptually, as well as empirically.

Reed *et al.* (2011) identified 55 items measuring key dimensions of SL from instruments created by Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Ehrhart (2004); Liden *et al.* (2008) and Page and Wong (2000); Wong and Page (2003) and modified these items to specifically measure "top executive behavior". Because the present study has targeted servant leaders from top management level, that is, top executive category, it was considered apt to use the scale developed by Reed *et al.* (2011) to identify servant leaders for our sample.

Initially, references of these leaders were obtained from the researchers' network of colleagues, friends and acquaintances in the field of education and in public and private sector. Based on feedback from leaders' subordinates and colleagues, we generated a list of 20 servant leaders. Out of 20 shortlisted leaders, 15 showed their willingness to participate in the study and completed the interviews.

Three of the respondents were from the education sector, four from the corporate sector and the remaining eight were from the public sector. In all, ten male and five female leaders in the age range of 45-65 were interviewed. The respondents had 20-35 years of service experience. All the respondents belonged to upper/top management level.

The researchers interviewed the respondents in person over a period of six months (April 2014-September 2014). The questions for the semi-structured interview were prepared with inputs and suggestions from scholars with expertise in qualitative research methods. The questions included in the interview schedule tried to study the approach of servant leaders toward various conflict situations. The open-ended

questions were designed to have an in-depth understanding of leaders' personal experiences and their perspectives regarding these situations. The semi-structured nature of interviews gave considerable flexibility to the participants to determine the extent and direction of the conversation for the given question. Before starting the interview, the following three things were kept in mind:

(1) The purpose of the study was thoroughly explained to the participants. The respondents were given an opportunity to ask questions, if any, from the researchers before the start of the interview.

(2) Participants were given assurance about confidentiality.

(3) The interviewer spent about 5-10 min for informal interaction with each participant to establish rapport. The persons giving reference of different leaders were involved at various occasions before the interview to enhance comfort level of the participants.

Interviews were audio-recorded. Data collection was concluded after 15 interviews. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy by the researchers who conducted the interviews.

Data analysis

Narratives were analyzed following interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith *et al.*, 2009) as a guiding methodological framework. "Phenomenology", according to Bishop and Scudder (1991), "attempts to disclose the essential meaning of human endeavors". To achieve this aim, phenomenology follows a methodical structure which involves dynamic interplay between six research activities (Van Manen, 1998). It starts with the researcher turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests him/her and committing to its study. This is followed by full thinking and deep questioning, so that life can be understood wholly. For this, experience is investigated as it is lived by the respondent rather than as it is conceptualized. After this, the researchers reflect on various essential themes that may characterize the phenomenon. Then the experience and its essence is described by using "thought and language", which has the potential to depict the lived experience precisely. The researcher may write and rewrite the description until he/she feels that the precision has been attained. Only if the researcher ensures a focused orientation to the fundamental question of enquiry, can he maintain his/her direction and come out with valid findings. In the whole process, the researcher needs to balance the research context by considering parts and wholes. In other words, the overall design of the study has to be constantly measured against a significant role that parts play in the whole structures.

We have used the model of Plowman *et al.* (2007), which espouses the use of a predetermined framework, for carrying out narrative analysis. In our study SL has been taken as a guiding overall model. We have used the conflict situations to find out how servant leaders perceive, experience and manage various situations and whether typical characteristics and values of servant leaders emerge while handling these situations. Various themes were developed based on data obtained from interviews with the participants.

The primary analysis of the transcripts was conducted by two researchers independently. After initial coding of transcripts, one more researcher was involved for reviewing the initial analysis and conducting the final analysis along with the first two

investigators. The key themes were discussed and reviewed by all the investigators for ensuring that saturation point regarding key themes had been reached.

There are three different approaches to identify themes from the given data/text (Van Manen, 1998):

(1) Holistic or sententious approach, which involves attending to the data as a whole and capturing the fundamental meaning of the data.

(2) Highlighting or selective approach, which involves repeatedly listening to or reading the text and examining the statements which seem to be particularly revealing.

(3) Line-by-line approach or detailed approach, which involves thorough study of each sentence cluster or sentence to determine what it says about the experience.

In the present study, the researchers adopted first two approaches to identify the themes. Initially, following the sententious/holistic approach, each transcript was read as a whole so that core/essential meaning of respondents' experiences could be captured. In the second step, researchers followed selective/highlighting approach, through which they identified the sub-themes/categories that contributed to the core theme. In other words, at this stage, significant statements illustrating the various dimensions of the core theme were identified and demarcated.

Data analysis followed the six undermentioned patterns:

(1) transcription of interviews;

(2) preparation of analytical and reflective memos;

(3) coding by individual researchers;

(4) systematic inter-researcher discussions to resolve discrepancies regarding coding and thematic categories;

(5) selection of central theme; and

(6) development of narrative themes.

In Step 5 and 6, the data were assembled in new ways. The team of researchers tried to identify the central theme, causal and intervening conditions and the specific context in which a particular characteristic or behavior of a leader emerged. In this step, an effort is also made to see the relationship of various themes. For example, in our study, failure of conflicting parties to resolve the conflict mutually becomes a reason for the leader to become actively involved in helping the conflicting parties to resolve the conflict. In some cases, it also paves the way for the leader to take the decision himself/herself and let the conflicting parties take the final call.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that qualitative research can provide more appropriate standards of evaluation and also protection of scientific rigor if it proves its trustworthiness in terms of confirmability, dependability, credibility and transferability. To evaluate confirmability, the present study took the help of two teachers trained in qualitative research to evaluate the process of identifying codes and themes, as well as the process of developing coding structures, thematic summaries and definitions, parameters and examples of codes. By thoroughly reading and coding the transcripts, they also checked that the saturation point regarding the key themes had been reached.

To evaluate dependability of the analysis, the trained teachers themselves analyzed the transcripts, developed codes and themes and compared their interpretation of narratives with those of the authors to see the levels of consistency between the two. The level of consistency was found to be quite high.

To evaluate credibility, the respondents were presented with the analysis of their interviews, i.e. the themes and supporting statements, and they were asked to confirm whether these themes represented their statements. The respondents showed high level of agreement with the themes and their interpretations. The criteria of transferability can be met if future research is able to corroborate and use these findings in the new contextual environments.

Harding (1987) suggests that the researchers should also be subjected to critical examination, the way it is done in case of overt subject matter. We also tried to observe and document our own assumptions, perspectives and biases while analyzing the data. For example, it was our assumption that a servant leader will be more empathetic, caring, humane and democratic while resolving a conflict. This assumption could affect our interpretation so an extra effort was made to constantly observe and guard against any intrusion by these biases and assumptions. Three stages followed in the development and evaluation of codes and themes, i.e. by individual researchers, by team of researchers and by auditors (teachers trained in qualitative research), is an example of this effort.

Findings
In the following sections, we outline two domains of conflict situations, presented to the leaders in various sectors – education, corporate and public. We also present the reactions and perception of the servant leaders to these situations, as well as their approach toward management of these situations as and when they come up before them.

Servant leadership and resolution of conflict
One of the objectives of the present study was to identify the strategies adopted by servant leaders while attempting to resolve subordinate–subordinate and superior–subordinate conflict. Both the situations have been studied and analyzed separately. For this, we have not relied on any existing theoretical framework of conflict resolution. However, as and when the need arose, the authors drew upon existing psychological theories of conflict resolution to interpret the coding categories and emergent themes.

Resolving subordinate–subordinate conflict
The results obtained from the first-hand narratives of leaders about their approach to conflict situations, confirm the assumption that servant leaders do actually adopt a more participative and persuasive approach in their interaction with employees. The coding categories, and the themes emerging from the statements of leaders, depict their unique style of managing conflict situation. In the following paragraphs, various coding categories and emerging themes, regarding conflict resolution strategies adopted by leaders, have been delineated and discussed distinctly, as well as in relation to one another. The first theme emerging from the data regarding conflict resolution relates to "Diagnosis of the conflict situation". This theme consists of three sub-themes – listening, discussion and understanding – of the conflict situation.

Diagnosis of the situation: active listening, discussion and understanding
Active and empathic listening is the hallmark of effective management. In the present study, 10 out of 15 leaders have distinctly used the words "listening", "active listening" or "empathic listening" to explain their strategy of conflict resolution. The leaders mostly listened to both of the conflicting parties separately in the beginning to get each party's point of view. At the second stage, discussion was held between the employees to understand the reasons for differences. In many cases, the leaders took active interest in the process of listening, discussing and understanding, whereas in one or two cases, after listening to both the conflicting parties separately, they brought the parties together and encouraged them to discuss the issues, understand the reasons for differences and find a solution in leader's presence.

The following statements show direct or indirect involvement of the leader in the "diagnosis" of conflict situation:

Whenever these members (subordinates) come up with a conflict, I sit individually with them, I listen to each party, discuss, gather facts to understand the issue thoroughly (R1).

My conflict resolution tactics are more cooperative […]We talk it out, we find out what the areas of disagreement are (R2).

Now, if there is a conflict then I try to resolve it by bringing them face to face (in my room) and making them interact and understand what led to the problem (conflict) (R3).

Every conflict has some reason – you take time, discuss in detail, understand the factors responsible for the conflict (R4).

As far as resolution of a conflict is concerned, first of all I try to understand the whole situation after hearing both the sides independently and then bring them together and tell them to give their point of view (R6).

If it is a dysfunctional conflict and is becoming very high, then we need to look as to what is the root cause (R10).

Normally what I do is I try to understand what the conflict is, so I will call one party, then the next party[…]. I listen to them, discuss with them (R12)

If I have reasons to believe that two of my junior colleagues are not getting along, normally what I do is to call each of them individually and ask them what is troubling them. I try to put my finger on the root cause (R14).

Firstly I listen to each one's viewpoints, listen to the first one and then the second one[…], to understand the hassle that is going on (R15).

These statements show that the respondents/participants in the present study are moving away from the traditional mechanistic approach to resolving subordinates' interpersonal differences. They seem to exhibit an approach to conflict resolution which meets the aspirations of the conflicting parties. Eight respondents used "understanding" as a preliminary tool for assessing the extent and severity of conflict situation. Following "listening" and "discussion", the process of "understanding" sets the stage for a collaborative approach to conflict resolution.

Leader's intervention in facilitating an amicable solution

The most prominent theme emerging from the narratives was the role played by the leaders in facilitating an amicable solution to the conflict situation. Sometimes, if the leader does not directly get involved in the diagnosis stage, he/she tends to take up the responsibility to bring both the conflicting parties together for face-to-face interaction, i.e. listening to each other, discussing various aspects of the situation and understanding the reasons for conflict. In such cases, he reviews the whole situation with the help of feedback from both the parties. The leader then brings both the conflicting parties together to see what can be done for the resolution of the conflict. The purpose is to find an amicable solution, underlined by a sense of ownership of the solution by the subordinates.

The role of the organizational leader as a facilitator in conflict resolution represents the traditional role of a parent. The leader may guide and counsel the conflicting parties and help them navigate through the process of conflict resolution.

For example, R1 stated:

> Most of the times my style is that I tell them, this is the problem, now what is it that you both propose […]it really helps[…], it becomes very easy for them to agree to that solution.

R2 also reiterated the use of similar strategy when he said, "I try to encourage cooperation and mutual research to understand and manage the differences (amongst employees)".

Some leaders prefer to hold face-to-face interaction of conflicting employees in their presence and tend to "contribute wherever possible", so that they can help them "see eye to eye" (R3) or "to cajole them to sort out their differences" (R14).

Another respondent (R15) tries to make both the parties focus on their common positive points "which can lead to a solution and ease the conflict".

The effectiveness of leader's active and direct intervention in conflict resolution was emphasized by one respondent who played a very active role in convincing each conflicting party to appreciate/understand the second party's viewpoint. This respondent, however, believed in keeping both the parties segregated till the solution was almost in reach. He did not want any clash of egos to interrupt the process of conflict resolution. This increased his responsibility to play a more active role in finding a solution.

R8 believes in counseling the conflicting parties to see the "positives" of each viewpoint and find the solution. He also emphasizes that their mutual conflict can harm them, as well as the organization, so finding a solution will be beneficial for both. According to him, "in 90 per cent of the cases his strategy has been successful".

Some of the leaders preferred to propose a solution themselves, a solution which should be acceptable to both the parties, "so that nobody has hard feeling about it" (R6) or "they should be happy with that" (R1).

The leaders might or might not sometimes involve the conflicting parties in reaching or finalizing this solution. For example, R5 proposes the solution while giving them the freedom to approach him in case of any difficulty. R4, on the other hand, just initiates the proposal and gives autonomy to the parties to take the final decision. "Most of the times, the employees will confirm or second the proposed solution, but they feel a sense of ownership if they are involved" (R4).

Impartial/objective approach of the leader
The success of leader's intervention in conflict resolution is determined by subordinates' perception about leader's impartiality and objectivity in his interactions with the subordinates. If the leader is perceived as siding with one of the parties in conflict, he loses credibility as a mediator. The servant leaders in our study are aware of this and ensure fairness, impartiality and objectivity in their day-to-day interactions. This is proven by the statements such as, "You cannot discriminate between the two. Both are valuable to you" (R4); "When I have to sit and resolve issues, I take a neutral position" (R5); "Our process of conflict resolution is based on complete evidence and proofs from all ends so that we discard subjectivity[…]"; and "80 per cent of the case get sorted out if they (employees) feel that you would be normally impartial[…]" (R12).

Perception of fairness, however, develops over time. As stated by one respondent, "If somewhere down the line, you can prove that you are fair in nature, and this happens over a period of transactions […] […] So they see that the person is fair or not" (R10).

Carrying credibility of "being fair", leaders may sometimes use their authority as a last option and impose their solution on both the parties if they fail to resolve the issue. This, however, is done with the intention of bringing harmony and cohesion in the organization. As stated by R1:

> Still if both of them don't agree, then I decide. Being a boss or a manager, I use my authority as a last stage, ensuring that their faith in my neutrality is retained.

Another respondent (R8) reiterated the need of being firm with employees who tend to create and sustain conflicts. He took a unilateral decision in such cases, "Though it is very rare. These people know I will be firm and fair so they fall in line".

A finding that needs special mention here is that the servant leader may play the role of both a mediator and arbitrator while handling subordinate–subordinate conflict. Initially, as a mediator, she/he tends to understand the reason for conflict and encourages mutual discussion between the conflicting parties, facilitating and smoothening the process of conflict resolution, whenever required. Sometimes she/he may manifest active engagement in fostering harmony between the two parties by helping them understand and appreciate each other's perspective and cajoling them to sort out their differences by seeing common positive points.

However, in cases where conflicting parties tend to sustain the conflict, the leader as an impartial arbitrator asserts his authority, makes decision about the issue and "persuades" both the parties to accept his/her solution. This, however, is done with the intention of bringing harmony and cohesion in the organization.

Separating conflicting parties – another strategy, though not quite prevalent – was adopted by some leaders when they found it tough to tame the two parties.

Out of three respondents who used this strategy, two were from the public sector, perhaps because of ease of transferability of employees in Government. R11, a high-ranking Government official remarked, "Another way would be […] if two officers are at constant loggerheads, then it will be better keeping them in two (separate) departments which do not require much of coordination […]".

R 13, another senior Government official, preferred to avoid the conflict situation by re-allocating work in a way that "they do not work together at one job or project".

R9, an entrepreneur in Southern India, also showed an inclination to shift the person from the team if he/she was not getting along well with other members of the team.

These statements show that the respondents are moving away from traditional mechanistic approach of resolving subordinates' interpersonal differences. They seem to exhibit a more humane approach to conflict resolution. Eight respondents used the term "understanding" as a preliminary tool for identifying the reasons, extent and severity of conflict situation. Following listening and discussion, the process of understanding sets the stage for a collaborative approach to conflict resolution.

Resolving superior–subordinate conflict
While handling subordinate–subordinate conflict, leader is the third party who can intervene as an impartial mediator/arbitrator to resolve the conflict. But, the real test of a leader's typical orientation for conflict resolution manifests when the leader himself/ herself faces a provocative behavior from the subordinate. Various coding categories and emergent themes in relation to superior–subordinate conflict resolution are given below:

Diagnosis of the situation: listening, discussion and understanding
Our data analysis reveals that listening, discussing and understanding have emerged as prominent theme in the diagnostic stage of superior–subordinate conflict situation also; 6 out of 15 respondents referred to the use of active listening and discussion, and five respondents to the use of understanding as strategies of conflict resolution. Four of these respondents stated that they used all the three strategies in their effort to handle a provocative situation. For example, R1 stated that "obviously the first part again (as in case of subordinate-subordinate conflict) will be that I listen to him (that is, when the subordinate indulges in a provocative behavior)". R4 emphasized that listening to the provocative employee requires sensitivity and sincerity so that the leader can understand the reason for employees' provocative behavior. "[…]they need a person to listen to them honestly, with all sensitivity […]You have to listen at least to the extent that he or she wants to speak, so that you will understand the mind of the person".

R7 suggested that listening to the provocative employee gives the employee time to cool off "because half the time people don't hear what the challenges are". This cooling off time is followed by a mutual discussion – "once both the parties settle down we come with a collective discussion on the provocation side of things[…]".

R12 also resorts to a similar strategy, i.e. giving cooling off time to the provocative employee and then discuss about the things that are agitating the employee. Such discussions naturally pave the way for a deeper understanding of the issue which provides a base for a customized resolution. As R15 puts it:

> […] if any staff is directly challenging you, or accusing you or saying that I will not obey you, you have to try to understand what is the thing behind it […] […] each individual case has to be dealt differently you cannot deal everybody with the same yardstick.

Temperance, patience, composure
Self-restraint, patience, tolerance, composure, etc. were some of the expressions used by seven respondents while referring to their strategy for managing provocative behavior of their subordinates. A transactional leader's natural reaction to any provocation by the subordinate could be punishment, withholding of rewards, denial of justice or any other retaliatory behavior, but a servant leader with his chief orientation for service to his subordinates manifests a more restrained, composed, considerate and humble behavior

when his/her subordinate deviates from the limits of decency and indulges in a potentially provocative behavior.

Seven out of fifteen respondents reportedly exhibited these characteristics when their subordinates indulged in a provocative behavior. This approach comes out vividly in a statement made by R3:

> […] initially I found there was lot of insubordination on his (subordinate's) part but over a period of time that I interacted with him, I retained my patience […]. the way I took any decision- building consensus, a persuasive approach- all these things I think made him approachable and at the end of it when I left the division, he was still there and we really parted as friends.

Along with patience, consensus building and persuasive approach R3 also incarnated humility in response to the insubordination of this employee. She remarked "[…]and then I always used to tell him […] I am here to learn and you will teach me. He was dealing with that particular sector for long and I had just been transferred. I was his boss but he knew a lot more and could give me lot of learning […] it is always a two-way relationship whether it is office or home". This statement indicates that servant leaders could behave in an incredibly humble manner – appreciating, encouraging, motivating and developing employees, on the one hand, and showing readiness to learn from employees having superior knowledge, on the other.

R4 remarked:

> […] they (subordinates) have certain aspirations. They have their own problems […]. If you have empathy with the employees you will try to resolve their problems […] for this, you need immense patience to listen first

R7 also preferred to:

> […] just talk and listen patiently on the kind of issues and worries that were bothering the subordinates. […] we typically don't raise any disciplinary issues if people are working for the organization and fighting for the organizational goals.

R8 retained his composure whenever faced with a provocative subordinate behavior. "if someone is aggressive, if someone tries to provoke, the way out is not getting provoked, the way out is retaining your calm and composure […]".

R11 stated, "I never get provoked by any aggressive or provocative behavior. Generally I don't lose control […]if there are provocations the best way to deal with them is to act in a sensible and mature manner rather than getting provoked and doing something hasty".

Discussion

The goal of this research study was to get an understanding of servant leaders' approach toward resolution of conflict as it arises between subordinates and between superiors and subordinates. The method of narrative inquiry was used to learn about the experiences and perspectives of servant leaders in education sector and public and private sectors. The respondents were given the flexibility to narrate their reactions to any conflict situation in the organization and also their *modus operandi* for resolving these conflicts. An analysis of the first-hand narratives of leaders confirms our assumption that servant leaders do actually adopt a more humane approach toward conflict resolution. While dealing with subordinate–subordinate conflict, they avoid

prescribing solutions from a higher platform. Instead, they encourage mutual diagnosis of the situation and a participatory approach toward resolution of the conflict. Servant leaders' preference for discussion, debate and open communication in conflict resolution seems to align with Galtung's (1996), framework of conflict resolution by peaceful means.

If the servant leaders feel that the conflicting parties are not able to resolve the issue, they intervene to facilitate an amicable solution. They guide and counsel the conflicting parties and help them navigate through the process of conflict resolution. There may be some situations where the conflicting parties may find it difficult to reach a mutual agreement or the leaders themselves may be very eager to help the conflicting employees reach a quick solution. In such cases, leaders prefer to hold face-to-face interaction of conflicting parties in their presence and cajole them to sort out their differences by understanding each other's point of view or by focusing on common positive points.

However, the servant leaders have to be perceived as objective and impartial to ensure success of their intervention. The servant leaders in our study seemed to be aware of employee expectations from them and ensured objectivity, impartiality and fairness in their day-to-day interactions.

Interestingly, even servant leaders may sometimes exercise authority and impose their solution on the subordinates if none of the conflicting parties is ready to see eye-to-eye with each other. Carrying the credibility of being fair leaders, they persuade the conflicting employees to accept their "rarely used authority" for ensuring cohesion and harmony in the organization. These findings suggest that a servant leader can play the role of a mediator, as well as an arbitrator, depending on the requirements of the situation. If nothing works, the servant leader may ultimately resort to "separating" the conflicting parties by putting them in different divisions/teams. In the government sector, because of ease of transferability of employees, the leaders could choose to exercise the option of separating uncompromising and unmanageable employees. Leaders in the private sector may also go for this option as a last resort.

A noteworthy finding of this study is that both in subordinate–subordinate and superior–subordinate conflict, "diagnosis of the conflict situation" is the preferred first step. This is despite the fact that in the latter conflict situation, leader himself/herself is the affected party, facing a provocation from the subordinate. If the affected party is ready to actively listen, discuss and understand the viewpoint of the offending party, it undeniably manifests the characteristics of temperance, humility, empathy, patience and composure in the affected party – in our case, the servant leaders. These characteristics were found to be emerging in the statements made by our respondents. The servant leaders exercised self-restraint and retained composure and patience to give a "cooling-off" time to the offending employee. They turned insubordination into understanding and lasting relationship of positivity.

It was a good experience for the researchers to interact with leaders who, instead of retaliating against or punishing provocative employees, were ready to respond with all humility, patience, empathy and self-restraint to enhance cohesion and cooperation in the organization. Through this behavior, they exhibited highly developed relational skills in terms of their ability to listen actively, build trust and ensure a mutually agreed upon resolution of conflict.

Connecting the themes with five key dimensions of Executive Servant Leadership Scale
The ESLS developed by Reed *et al.* (2011) identified five key behavioral dimensions of
executive servant leaders, namely, interpersonal support; building community;
egalitarianism; moral integrity; and altruism. Various aspects of abovementioned
behavioral dimensions, which were "relevant" for conflict resolution, could be discerned
in the conflict resolution strategies adopted by our respondents.

Interpersonal support
In ESLS, the items used to operationalize interpersonal support included helping others
succeed, listening carefully to others, treating employees with dignity and respect,
sharing decision-making with the affected people, etc. These characteristics have been
very clearly manifested by our respondents as can be seen in the statements of
respondents given in the "findings" section of the article. While resolving conflict, the
servant leaders used listening, discussion and understanding as the first step. They
tried their best to help their subordinates resolve the conflict mutually, gave an
opportunity to the subordinates to participate fully in making the final decision and
ensured the dignity and respect of the subordinates even when they indulged in
provocative behavior toward the leader.

Building community
The attribute of building internal community is operationalized in items such as
encouraging a spirit of cooperation, valuing individual differences and inspiring
organizational commitment. While resolving subordinate–subordinate conflict most of
our respondents encouraged our subordinates to appreciate the "positives" in each
other's view point and cooperate with each other in reaching a solution through "mutual
research". Our respondents valued individual differences by appreciating differences of
opinion and tried to "build consensus" while making decisions.

Egalitarianism
To operationalize egalitarianism, Reed *et al.* (2011) used items such as displaying
interest in learning from subordinates, welcoming constructive criticism, encouraging
debate of their ideas, etc. In our study, we could discern that some of our respondents
showed eagerness to learn even from their subordinates, if the latter had superior
knowledge. Similarly, while resolving subordinate–subordinate conflict, whenever the
leaders proposed a solution, they encouraged the subordinates to discuss and debate the
proposal before accepting it (except in extreme situations where the subordinates were
not ready to resolve the conflict).

Moral integrity
In ESLS, moral integrity has been operationalized in items such as inspiring employee
interest, manifesting and promoting transparency and honesty, freely admitting
mistakes, etc. As reported by our respondents, in their day-to-day interaction with
subordinates, as well as while resolving conflict with subordinates, they ensured
fairness, objectivity, impartiality and transparency. This theme has emerged very
clearly in the statements of various respondents.

Altruism

The dimension of altruism in ESLS includes items such as sacrificing personal benefits to meet employee needs, serving others willingly with no expectation of rewards, preferring to serve others over being served and placing the interest of others before self-interest.

Altruism, defined in terms of not expecting any rewards and sacrificing ones' benefits for others may not be relevant in conflict resolution. However, an undercurrent of altruism in terms of placing others interest before self-interest and preferring to serve others over being served can be discerned in the statements of our respondents.

Limitations

As stated by Riessman (1993), "stories are inherently multilayered and ambiguous, so narrative inquiry is bounded by the constructed nature of truth" and, hence, present subjective and individual perspectives. While this is a weakness, if we are able to decipher the commonalities in the aspects of perspective, it helps at generalization. Identification of themes from the narratives is actually a process of deciphering these commonalities.

Standardized tool could have been used for identifying servant leaders, based on self-report, for our study. Efforts were, however, made to overcome this limitation by following a rigorous method of selecting our sample. As mentioned in the section on "methodology", the servant leaders in the present study were selected based on the feedback by eight-ten present and past subordinates and colleagues of each leader. This feedback was derived from in-depth interviews of these people. Selecting servant leaders on the basis of feedback has its own strength. When people working with the leader testify the existence of given behavioral dimensions in the leader, it could be a more valid measure of a leader's behavior.

The interview questions used for getting the feedback were based on ESLS developed by Reed *et al.* (2011). As already mentioned, this questionnaire has been specifically developed to measure key dimensions of top executive behavior – a sample used in this study.

In a qualitative study, there is increased danger of researchers' bias at various stages of data analysis. A conscious effort was thus made to minimize the potential bias by taking various measures to ensure maximum objectivity while identifying themes and categories.

Lack of a comparison group, may be another limitation of the study. It may constrain our conclusion that the emergent conflict management style is associated with SL only. Here, we would like to emphasize that the present research study was designed to elucidate servant leaders' approach to conflict resolution, not to compare and contrast it with the approach of other types of leaders toward conflict resolution. Our results can become a basis for future qualitative research wherein, a comparison can be made between conflict resolution strategies of servant leaders and other leaders.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to investigate the choice of conflict management strategies made by servant leaders whenever there are subordinate-subordinate and superior–subordinate conflict situations in the organization.

By highlighting the conflict resolution strategies of servant leaders, based on leaders' personal account of their experiences and reflections, the study findings address an important gap in the conflict management literature. The narrative inquiry/qualitative approach of investigation adopted in this study gave us an opportunity to have an in-depth understanding of how servant leaders deal with subordinate–subordinate and superior–subordinate conflict. A noteworthy finding that has emerged is that servant leaders prefer to be persuasive, patient, humble and employee-centered in their approach to conflict resolution whether they are playing the role of a third-party mediator/arbitrator or facing subordinate's provocation as a first party. The respondents coming from education, corporate and government sectors, exhibit a striking similarity in handling conflicting and provocative subordinates, suggesting that we can generalize these results across sectors.

The conflict–resolution approach of our respondents manifests a leadership style that is cooperative and supportive, compassionate and benevolent, relational and persuasive in nature. It is proposed that such leadership orientation has the potential to give rise to a culture of civility and collaboration, cohesion and commitment and compassion and forgiveness. In other words, the positive, virtuous and life-giving aspects of a leader's behavior can enhance OCB which may entail cohesiveness, collaboration, compassion and forgiveness in the interpersonal relations of employees, on the one hand, and commitment, engagement and development of employees, on the other. These concomitants of OCB, in turn, pave the way for organizational success. The above assertion has been confirmed by researchers like Podsakoff *et al.* (2009), who reported an association between OCB and employee performance, organizational efficiency, organizational productivity and customer satisfaction.

In the light of authors' proposal that servant leader's humble, persuasive and humane approach to conflict resolution has the potential to foster OCB, and the research evidence in favor of OCB's positive impact on organizational success, the future researchers can empirically study the cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of employee attitude toward conflict resolution strategies of their servant leaders. Any positive change in employee attitudes can have implications for the emergence of a cordial and forgiving organizational environment, wherein the workforce may become highly cooperative, highly motivated and highly productive.

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