

Servant-Leadership as an Institutionalized Model in Air Force Education

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Abstract

This essay analyzes existing evidence for the potential of servant leadership to positively influence military education. Research in public schools, higher institutions of learning, and military are utilized for this purpose. The evidence explored in the literature review suggests there are numerous benefits to implementing servant leadership methodology in classrooms and organizations. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze whether servant leadership in Air Force education has yielded or would yield positive changes in academic performance, mission accomplishment, leadership trust, intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and/or service to others. The summative assessment is reached that there is inconclusive evidence whether servant leadership has produced or can produce the same effects seen outside the military. It is an additional uncertainty if servant leadership and servant teaching are practices that can be adopted within the military culture. The essay concludes with suggestions for future research and future pilot studies within Professional Military Education (PME).

Servant-leadership practices and principles have presented the potential for profound shifts in the long-practiced teacher-oriented learning process. J. Martin Hays (2008) says servant-leadership focused classrooms promote higher motivation to learn and serve. Instructor and student leave with more knowledge, greater skills, and increased commitment to contribute to their environment (Chonko, 2007). At present, adequate research exists to conclude that servant-leadership is a highly effective model for follower development, but little research exists on whether there is a significant correlation between servant-leadership and teaching effectiveness or student development within the military. With this in mind, numerous interrelated research questions arise for U.S. Air Force education. 1) Would adopting servant leadership as an institutionalized model in Air Force education yield significant results in student/follower development in the areas of academic performance, intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and service to others? 2) If so, what teaching or training method would serve most effectively in institutionalizing servant-leadership in Air Force Education? 3) Is it feasible for a military instruction, rooted in traditional leadership styles and micro-management, to incorporate servant-leadership as a teaching and leadership model? If there is a correlation between servant leadership styles in an Air Force educational setting and successful performance of subordinates, it should drastically change the leadership doctrine of the present. Furthermore, some studies suggest Company Grade Officer (CGO) retention would increase if servant leadership were an institutionalized model in Air Force leadership and education. The current climate of dictatorial leadership leads to deleterious conditions for today's CGOs in the Air Force. CGOs who leave the Air Force have reported that they lack trust in their leaders to have their interests at heart (Vadell, 2008). Most of these officers reported they would remain in the Air Force beyond their four year commitment if better trust in leadership could be established. Chris Ewing and Jamiel Vadell (n.d.) propose that if servant leadership were more universal, relationships of trust could be built, and CGOs would be more likely to stay in active duty. Air Force teachers and leaders are not groomed to be servant leaders. The formal education on leadership provided to Air Force personnel today is arguably overcomplicated (Vadell & Ewing, n.d.).

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Rather than promoting autonomy and fostering environments that cultivate intrinsic motivation in students and followers, leadership doctrine of today revolves around a complex mish-mash of incentives, fear of failure, rigorous management, and authoritarian orders. To be sure, leaders today are highly encouraged to “know their people” by learning followers’ values, attitudes, and aspirations.

However, the primary focus of higher level orders or mission completion nearly always trumps leadership servitude. Professional Military Education Classes (PME) might be the prime location to implement the teaching of servant leadership. Commissioned officers attend four years of either Reserve Officer Training Corps or the Air Force Academy prior to entering service; adequate time to promote a better method of leadership. Courses like Squadron Officer School, taken after approximately four years into active service, are made specifically to hone leadership skills. This is absolutely one of the prime locations to incorporate servant leadership styles. If it is likely servant leadership would yield meaningful changes in Air Force students and followers, and there are already preliminary vessels for teaching leaders how to be good servant leaders; would the military climate and culture support this change? It may not. The military as a whole, with its highly standardized leadership and education styles, may have a major problem with incorporating servant leadership (Crippen, 2004). Dr. Crippen agrees with the assessment that servant-leadership requires more research as to whether it is a viable model for schools and institutions of higher learning. The hierarchical structure of the American Military is typically well known. This alone is logically at odds with the principles of servant leadership. But moreover, budget cuts and manning concerns means military teachers and leaders are more stretched thin (Vadell, & Ewing, n.d.). The demands of mission priorities, additional duties, and promotion requirements (military testing, advanced degrees etc.) often causes leaders to resort to dictatorial leadership and handsoff teaching because it is simpler and less time consuming than empathetic servant leadership. In the long run, this hurts subordinates and does not teach autonomy or encourage intrinsic motivation. This in turn, brings about a cycle of followers learning how to be dictatorial leaders themselves. Is it possible to break the chain of micro-managerial leadership? Further research and exploration is needed to assess the possibility of this much needed shift in Air Force practice.

The following literature review is designed to ascertain if there is compelling evidence that servant leadership in military education has yielded or would yield increases in academic performance/mission accomplishment, leadership trust, intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and/or service to others. Extensive literature defining servant leadership is available today. J. Martin Hays (2008) goes one step further than definitions by describing ten primary attributes of a servant leader, and translating them into an educational context to develop a notional “servant teacher.” Hays uses samples of adult learning course evaluations in which servant leadership models were fully adopted by class instructors to argue that servant leadership in education encourages flexibility, initiative, responsibility, self-direction, collaboration and inclusive attitudes. Dr. Carolyn Crippen (2004) utilizes the same ten characteristics as Hays in defining servant leadership, and makes a similar argument for the beneficial effects of servant leadership on education. Hays, however, believes the servant teaching style does not work for everyone. Both Hays and Crippen acknowledge more research, specifically long term (Crippen, 2004), is needed to identify if there are predictors for who responds positively to a servant teaching environment. Unfortunately, the conventional teaching and leading styles of the military (status quo, hierarchical command and control, and power disparities) may impede systematically incorporating servant leadership (Crippen, 2004; Hays, 2008). Contrary to this hypothesis, Matthew Earnhardt (2008) conducted a study measuring servant leader traits and their interconnectedness across multiple branches of service. With the sole exception of perceived philosophical “vision” differences among military ranks, relationships between servant leadership traits were not influenced by military service, rank, or gender. This supports the portability of servant leadership theory to a military context (Earnhardt, 2008).

It appears there is still no definitive answer on the compatibility of full scale incorporation of servant leadership in the military, let alone Air Force Education specifically. Yet there are some research examples that suggest micro level experiments in servant leadership have yielded positive results in organizational trust, trust in leadership, academic and mission performance, intrinsic motivation and service to community. Sandra Reinke (2004) surveyed a small Army ROTC unit to empirically test if defined servant leadership traits of openness, stewardship, and vision lead to a culture of trust within a military organization. From the study, the servant leadership model used by Reinke was clearly related to trusting relationships and improved organization performance. A 2005 study positively correlated perceived servant leadership with trust in leaders (Joseph, & Winston, 2005). This is a crucial finding as the need for greater trust in military leaders is a recurring theme in the literature surrounding servant leadership in Air Force Education (Vadell, 2008; Vadell, & Ewing, n.d.).

Leading and teaching effectiveness is another likely outcome from military servant leadership, in addition to trust. Michael McCuddy and Matthew Cavin (2008) used a previously validated online survey instrument to sample diverse group settings across 29 states. Using a one-tail *t*-test for measuring their correlations, the 156 survey responses provided “exceptionally strong” correlation between the practice of servant leadership and leadership effectiveness. Conversely, Karen Jacobs (2011) also completed a qualitative correlation study on perceived servant leadership and teaching effectiveness.

Only four private universities and a total of 68 surveys were utilized (only 21% return rate). Jacob’s study did not yield a statistically significant correlation between perceived servant leadership and effective teaching at the university level. She cites studies by Hays (2008) and Crippen (2004) in which the application of servant leadership values to a classroom created substantial differences in learning, but believes her lack of findings may be attributed to the smaller sampling in her research. Intrinsic motivation and closely linked student autonomy may also be linked to servant leadership in education. Cordoya and Lepper (1996) found that grade school participants showed a dramatic increase in learning motivation, engagement, amount learned in a fixed time period, and levels of learning aspiration when given choices of learning path, and contextualized lessons. When electronic lessons were designed to give students a sense of control and self-determination, intrinsic motivation categorically increased. Pelletier and Vallerand (1996) conducted an undergraduate study on the implications of supervisors’ perceptions on their subordinates’ intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. In complete support of “self-fulfilling prophecy” theories, supervisors who were told their subordinates were intrinsically motivated were less controlling and more supportive of autonomy. This in turn translated into significantly more intrinsic interest and time on task during free-choice periods than the subordinates labeled “extrinsically motivated” showed. Similarly, students’ perceptions of the teachers’ motivations also seems to influence student autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Wild, Enzle, and Hawkins (1992) conducted a study of undergraduate musical instruction in which students were all given identical piano lessons. However, some students were convinced the teacher was motivated by a \$25.00 fee while others were told the teacher was a volunteer. Even with a scripted lesson for either situation, students receiving the “volunteer” teacher reported liking playing the test song more, experimented more in the free-play portion of the experiment, expressed a greater desire to learn more about piano playing after the lesson, and expressed an overall more positive mood.

Finally, anecdotal evidence suggests servant leadership principles encourage a culture of community (Tate, 2003). Teamwork, rather than centralized control, creates a culture of shared responsibility in the education setting. This concept means the measure of importance of a team member is not the ability to control others, but the ability to develop strength and ability in team members (Bendtro & Ness, 1983). However, further empirical studies are needed to establish a correlation between servant leadership and a greater sense of community and service to others. The collective theme in the current body of literature is that servant leadership, in various educational and leadership settings, has been correlated to increased trust, performance, intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and possible servitude. However, additional literature and further research has been suggested in order to understand if the same result can be seen in a specifically Air Force educational setting. This analytical essay investigates servant leadership as it relates to military education. Specifically, has servant leadership in Air Force education yielded or would it yield positive changes in the broken-down components of academic performance, mission accomplishment, leadership trust, intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and/or service to others? For purposes of this research project, military education is defined as both the education and training classrooms of the military and professional leadership education programs designed to enhance military leaders’ skills.

The previous literature review outlines some of the evidence and opinions available today. On the whole, many educators and researchers who ascribe to the servant leadership model identify the following primary characteristics of servant leaders: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building communities (Spears, 1998; Crippen, 2004; Hays, 2008). J. Martin Hays (2008) argues that these principles in educational leaders encourage flexibility, initiative, responsibility, self-direction, collaboration and inclusive attitudes amongst students. Creativity, innovation, and deep learning are consequences of removing the typical structured boundaries of teacher centered learning (Warburton, 2003). It can be argued that examples of full-fledged servant teaching examples cited by Hays (2008) and Crippen (2004) show a wide variety of benefits like these, not the least of which is a transformational education experience.

"The class had established some of the highest levels of trust, respect, and honesty that I have ever experienced in a study or work," read one student's course evaluation. Another student's email to classmates read "every difficult step along the way our [teacher] was there to help us discover the tools, techniques, knowledge, and skills we had there within and around us all along!...We have not been told how; we found the way ourselves. We can now fly, and we can teach others the same way" (Crippen, 2004). There exists a wealth of evidence for a vast array of successes and benefits of servant leadership models in education. The deeper question is if these benefits have been or can be translated into an Air Force military education setting with similar success.

To directly address the research question that opened this essay, the elements in question (trust, performance, intrinsic motivation/autonomy and service/community) are broken down and analyzed separately below.

Trust

The current climate of dictatorial leadership leads to deleterious conditions for today's Company Grade Officers (CGOs) in the Air Force. Young officers are already under numerous pressures in today's extremely tight fiscal climate. The "do more with less" mentality often falls directly onto these face-to-face leaders, who must balance primary occupations with additional duties, follower mentorship, graduate studies, "highly encouraged" community service and more (Vadell, and Ewing, n.d.). Once their four year service commitment is up, many CGOs leave the Air Force reporting that they lack trust in their leaders, and do not believe their superiors have their followers' interests at heart (Vadell, 2008). Even observers outside the military can understand why trust in military leadership may be at an all time low. Within the month of May 2013 an Air Force Lieutenant Colonel and an Army Sergeant, both assigned to separate sexual assault prevention and response units, were themselves arrested for sexual assault (Ford, 2013). It is suggestible then that the military needs a change in the current trust dynamic. Could servant leadership coaching be a solution? Saundra Reinke (2004) surveyed a small Army ROTC unit to empirically test if defined servant leadership traits of openness, stewardship, and vision lead to a culture of trust within a military organization. According to Reinke, the servant leadership model used was "clearly related" to trusting relationships and improved organization performance. A similar study by Joseph and Winston (2005) correlated perceived servant leadership qualities with trust in leaders. Though other studies in civilian sectors echo this finding, there is a lack of further research specific to trust in military leaders. Researches currently suggest that body of existing evidence means institutionalized servant leadership in Air Force Professional Military Education Courses and classrooms *should* foster a culture of trust. Jamiel Vadell and Chris Ewing (n.d.) argue that if servant leadership were more universal, relationships of trust would be built. Vadell's (2008) survey and interview respondents report that CGO retention would go up if servant leadership qualities like trust were more apparent in supervisors leading styles. Joseph and Winston's (2005) research suggests the same. The potential for gains is great, however empirical evidence that servant leadership incorporation would directly influence military trust needs to be expounded upon.

Teaching Effectiveness / Mission Performance

Student and follower performance is perhaps the most difficult element to objectively measure. Just as there is no single leadership style that is universally effective in every situation, there is no universal measure of effectiveness in group performance. High performance in an athletic team will be evidenced by different traits and behaviors than a technology sales team. With this in mind, most studies are dependent upon respondents' descriptions of leadership effectiveness to gauge whether servant leadership has an effect. In general, survey research studies like that of Michael McCuddy and Matthew Cavin (2008) utilize t-tests to look for correlations in servant leadership behaviors and reported effectiveness. McCuddy and Cavin found an "exceptionally strong" correlation, mirroring similar reports from Hays (2008) and Crippen (2004). Karen Jacobs (2011) completed a qualitative correlation study, but a small total of 68 surveys were utilized (only 21% return rate). Jacob's study did not yield a statistically significant correlation between perceived servant leadership and effective teaching at the university level, but believes the small turnout may be a contributing factor. Significant anecdotal and survey evidence exists to make a strong case for the association between servant leadership and follower performance. But, empirical evidence is difficult to gather due to the nature of universally defining and measuring performance, and scant research exists as directly related to a military classroom.

Intrinsic Motivation /Autonomy

Just as there is a leadership trust deficit in the Air Force today, so is there a need for subordinate autonomy and intrinsic motivation amongst followers. Leadership styles in the military tend to be controlling and dependent on external contingencies.

Physical rewards, be they ribbons, certificates for good grades, or passes are often referred to as “candy;” and they have become just as common. Opposite the rewards is the military system of strict rules with harsh punishment. Vadell and Ewing (n.d.) argue that this system of external contingencies is harmful, especially for young leaders in the Air Force as they learn to perform for gain or fear of loss rather than out of intrinsic motivation to accomplish the mission. Vadell and Ewing believe greater autonomy and choice - instead of “shut up and color” - would result in higher self regulation and intrinsic motivation. Current research supports this notion. Diana Cordova and Mark Lepper (1996) found that grade school participants showed a dramatic increase in learning motivation, engagement, amount learned and levels of learning aspiration when given choices of learning path, and contextualized lessons.

Though Cordova and Lepper’s study involved gradeschoolers, Luc Pelletier and Robert Vallerand (1996) conducted an undergraduate study (a much closer age group to military classrooms) on the implications of supervisors’ perceptions on their subordinates’ intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Supervisors who were told their subordinates were intrinsically motivated were less controlling and more supportive of autonomy. Wild, Enzle, and Hawkins’ (1992) study of undergraduate musical instruction, in which students were all given identical piano lessons, had some students convinced the teacher was motivated by a \$25.00 fee while others were told the teacher was a volunteer. Students receiving the “volunteer” teacher reported liking playing the test song more, experimented more in the free-play portion of the experiment, expressed a greater desire to learn more about piano playing after the lesson, and expressed an overall more positive mood. Once again, numerous research studies show a very strong correlation between servant leadership characteristics and intrinsically motivated use of autonomy by students and followers. However, little direct evidence exists that the same holds true in the military. Rigorous and numerous rules within the typical military structure do not often allow for much personal choice or work autonomy. Chris Ewing (2010) conducted a study on the relationship of Air Force officer’s assignment choice allowances and their academic achievement. The nuclear career field members he researched lead Ewing to argue that indeed more choice within the military, rather than obligatory direction will naturally increase intrinsic motivation and higher achievement. Further research in a wider array of Air Force career fields and military education settings would greatly contribute to this evidence.

Service / Community

A servant leader seeks not self empowerment, but team empowerment. Devotion to team, organization, and community to help others achieve self-actualization and spread “good karma” is a common description of a servant leader’s commitment to community. Servant leaders believe the measure of importance for a leader or team member is not their ability to control others, but to develop strength and ability in team members (Bedntro and Ness, 1983). Some scholars of servant leadership believe servant leadership principles spread a community culture of service to others. Even if unproven, this can be a crucial point for Air Force leaders. One of the Air Force’s Core Values is “service before self.” However, today’s culture of major financial cutbacks in the military has created a dog-eat-dog world for most Air Force Officers. The high stakes involved in career progression, performance reports and awards makes it almost necessary for officers to seek self-interest before service to a team in order to maintain a job, let alone progress in their career. The Air Force is in dire need of teaching and practicing service oriented leadership to combat the ever increasing hypocrisy in this area. Leaders and professional military education curricula must overtly work to change the current culture of self-centeredness in order to uphold the Core Value of “service before self.” Servant Leadership education may hold a key to doing just that.

Research evidence does suggest that servant leadership could indeed contribute to an increase in academic performance/mission accomplishment, leadership trust, intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and/or service to others. This could translate into meaningful changes both at the micro level view of Air Force classrooms, and the macro level view of leader-follower relationships all over the Air Force as a whole. The means and methods that could or should be used to give Air Force teachers and leaders the knowledge and skills to become servant leaders is a topic worthy of numerous separate dissertations and pilot studies. At the least, it is worth considering the implementation of a servant leadership curriculum in professional military education courses for leaders. Programs such as the Air Force Academy (USFA), Senior Non-Commissioned Officer (SNCO) Academy, Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), and Squadron Officer School (SOS) are all schools designed for leaders at different levels to focus primarily on honing their leadership knowledge and skills.

Even without certain proof that servant leadership styles will produce definitive positives for the Air Force, one or multiple pilot study classes at these school could serve to gather more evidence for the benefits while experimenting with best practices for implementing this type of curriculum on large scale. Servant Leadership Model's potential for positive changes in Air Force Education is vast. Undoubtedly, there are current opportunities for exploration and experimentation toward realizing this potential. The current Air Force leadership paradigm in leadership development courses, military education settings, and within the Air Force as whole is in need of an overhaul. Vadell and Ewing (n.d.) set the stage well for why the Air Force is in need of what servant leadership may have to offer. They argue that trust and intrinsic motivation is considerably low amongst followers in the military, and their research provides convincing evidence that this might be rectified through servant leadership (Vadell, 2008; Vadell and Ewing, 2004).

A wealth of servant leadership research exists surrounding grade school, high school, undergraduate education, and private organizations. The body of evidence available today offers a compelling if not convincing conclusion that there is a wealth of positive benefits to be reaped from servant leadership in many various organizations (Black, 2010; Locander and Luechauer 2006; Senjaya, Sarros and Santora, 2008). However, available evidence for effects of servant leadership in active duty military is underwhelming. It is not definitive if servant leadership in education or culturally adapted practice would directly yield the same reported benefits seen outside the military. Hays (2008) and Crippen (2004) suggest servant leadership styles may not work for everyone, and longer-term studies are needed to determine what bodies of students and followers would respond most positively to this teaching and leading style. Hays furthermore expresses concern that military structure of hierarchy and large power disparities may present a much greater challenge to implementation of servant leadership than other institutions (Hays, 2008). Though Matthew Earnhardt's research suggests the perception of servant leadership traits may not differ by military rank or status, he admits that a small cross section of the military was used in his study, and more expanded research is needed (Earnhardt, 2008). Sandra Reinke (2004) admits that leadership is such a complex topic that, though her study of ROTC leaders was very suggestive, it cannot conclusively prove causation of servant leadership on the creation of trust in a military function. There are numerous unanswered questions. Is the military structure and culture compatible with a shift toward the less structured and more trusting principles of servant teaching? Would there be a difference in successful implementation of a servant leadership culture based on the methods chosen to systematize this style within military education? Could success rates be varied based on military audience; i.e. enlisted personnel versus officers, or space systems operators versus infantrymen?

A pilot study similar to the research from Hays (2008) could be conducted among leaders in one or more developmental schools such as the Non-Commissioned Officer Academy (NCOA) for upper enlisted supervisors, or the Squadron Officer School (SOS) course for Captains. Teachers and curricula could offer a deep dive into both demonstrating servant teaching and delivering servant leadership theory and practice. Student response and future behavioral changes of these leaders could be observed and documented to see how the curriculum has or has not influenced teaching and leading styles. Unfortunately, it is inconclusive whether servant leadership has had or will have a major influence on military trust, intrinsic motivation, performance, or community service. However, surveys and documentaries suggests these areas are in need of assistance in Air Force education, and civilian research has yielded promising results that may translate into the military. Further research, perhaps through the methods suggested above, will enhance understanding of this topic and may one day help military leadership and teaching styles reach a greater potential.

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