Inclusive Leadership as Practice Literature Review

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Implementing an effective leadership practice within an organization is essential for supporting individuals' diverse experiences, identities, and ideas. When choosing the best leadership practice, leaders need to self-reflect on how they are communicating the organization's values and vision through their behavior and procedures. Inclusive leadership as a practice requires leaders to authentically build relationships with individuals and embrace character traits that will foster a workplace environment where all members of the organization are respected, heard, and included in decision-making processes and the organization's success. Understanding that each individual within an organization is complex with their own experiences and identities should influence how leaders develop their inclusive leadership as practice.

Leadership styles can make a significant impact on positive and negative organizational outcomes. Approaching leadership from more of a situational lens can be beneficial for an organization by considering how decisions will directly affect both individual members and the organization as a whole. Bourke and Dillion (2016) explain that commitment, courage, cognizance, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and collaboration are the six signature traits that an individual needs to lead inclusively. Democratic and servant leadership styles incorporate these specific elements and align mindsets and behaviors to inclusive practices. Democratic leadership values diverse thinking and acknowledges the importance of creating a safe space to communicate effectively. While servant leadership establishes a community culture with a strong sense of belonging by prioritizing employee needs and opinions. As an inclusive leader, situationally utilizing components of democratic and servant leadership styles can (1) encourage cultural and emotional intelligence development, (2) help develop policies that support and reflect organizational members' needs, and (3) cultivate a collaborative environment where

diverse voices and experiences are empowered and embedded into all aspects of the organization.

Democratic Leadership

Characteristics and Behaviors

Democratic leadership centers around the participation of each team member to contribute their ideas and concerns about any decision-making processes. This requires that the leader demonstrate inclusive traits such as courage and curiosity to better understand how their decisions impact short-term and long-term goals and the experiences of both their stakeholders and the individuals on their team. Similar to this mindset, democratic leaders can be described as being egalitarian, fair-minded, adaptive, engaged, role models, forward-thinking, team-oriented, and consensus builders (*What is Democratic/Participative Leadership?* 2018). These qualities in a leader allow members of an organization to participate in shared responsibilities and communicate how their experiences and ideas can be a valuable piece in generating positive problem-solving solutions. While collaboration and community building is a significant element in democratic leadership, the leader is trusted to make the best decision for the entire group. This calls for leaders to be courageous enough to so they understand their own personal strengths and areas of weakness that may be due to their lack of knowledge or personal experience.

Developing cultural and emotional intelligence is an essential first step in transforming one's leadership practice from purely an outcome-driven mindset to one that intentionally seeks to build authentic relationships. Democratic leaders reflect and care about how their decisions and behaviors affect others' experiences and value the opinions of people they work with. To successfully manage conflicting ideas while also keeping all involved highly motivated, leaders have to utilize these authentic relationships within their organization. The only way to initiate

and maintain relationships where individuals feel safe to bring parts of their identities into the workplace is to "take an active interest in learning about other cultures" (Bourke & Dillion, 2016, p. 16) and to build on one's self and relationship management within the scope of emotional intelligence (*Organizational Behavior,* 2017).

Kelly and McDonald (2019) state that "democratic leaders who are characterized by encouraging two-way communication are most likely to provide the foundation necessary to develop solidarity" (p. 437). To establish this type of culture between members of an organization, inclusive leaders have to be willing to illustrate humility, openness, and empathy towards members of their teams. Dillion and Sable (2021) explain that to lead with an inclusive lens, these personal attributes "create an environment of psychological safety where members feel safe to speak up without fear of negative consequences" (p. 3). Democratic leaders incorporate these qualities into their leadership style because they are modeling vulnerability to present their authentic selves in situations where they are communicating that they need input from members that may have a better insight into the decision-making process. They listen attentively to concerns and feedback to better the organization and to become a more inclusive leader for all members of the organization. Valuing and demonstrating exemplary behavior of one's ongoing development of cultural and emotional intelligence will provide authentic opportunities to learn about individuals within the organization.

Effectiveness

Callier's (2020) research into democratic leadership styles discovered that this style positively influences public service motivation (PSM) and receives all levels of support members directly affected by the democratic leader's decisions. An experimental research design was conducted by developing a fictional superintendent for a school district and had participants

respond to an online survey examining the superintendent's performance. In comparison to democratic leadership's direct contrast, autocratic leadership, the superintendent's performance was rated highly because they empowered others to share the responsibilities, their opinions, and were considered in each decision-making process (Callier, 2020). Khajeh (2018) discussed similar findings with democratic leadership directly having a positive influence on individuals' performance. They suggested that "It is important for a leadership style to offer opportunities to employees, offer a sense of belonging along with allowing them to participate in the decision-making (p. 9). Considering democratic leadership centers these types of opportunities, it was recommended as a highly productive type of leadership style to improve organizational performance.

Democratic leadership can promote organizational involvement and commitment because individuals are able to bring their authentic selves to work and are not threatened by feelings of being silenced or that their opinions are less than others' (Cherry, 2020). Embedding diversity and inclusion practices throughout all levels of an organization require that behaviors and culture are consistent. Applying the democratic leadership style can increase employee productivity, satisfaction, and commitment, which overall can support the "organizational ability to facilitate change across all its levels" (Kelly & MacDonald, 2019, p. 434) when organizations are working to implement a more collaborative and inclusive framework. Just as Dillion and Sable (2021) describe inclusive leaders stepping up to use "their power to challenge the status quo, influencing the adaptation of systems and structures that reinforce the centrality of diversity and inclusion to the organization's purpose and business strategy" (p. 3), democratic leaders ability to listen and become an advocate for others through their decision-making processes will provide diverse individuals the workplace environment and support they need to be successful.

Challenges

While democratic leadership practices have shown to be highly beneficial and collaborative, the leader ultimately makes the end decision. If the leader does not provide opportunities for their employees to develop their skills, poor decision-making could be influenced by misinformation or teams' lack of experience (Cherry, 2020; *What is Democratic/Participative Leadership?* 2018). Decisions that required a quick turnaround, may also not be best with the democratic leadership style. Collaboration can still occur, but leaders may not have the time to seek out input from multiple members of an organization. This can lead to the perception that not everyone has an equal stake in decision-making processes at times (Khajeh, 2018). New inclusive leaders that are looking to adopt elements of the democratic leadership style can "become overly dependent on the expertise and experience of subordinates" (*What is Democratic/Participative Leadership?* 2018). Finding a balance between including diverse voices and experiences into policies, systems, and procedures and trusting one's ongoing development in cultural and emotional intelligence to make the best decisions that are representative and inclusive to members of the organization will be a challenge with the highly collaborative democratic leadership style.

Servant Leadership

Characteristics and Behaviors

Servant leadership can be described as "serving instead of commanding, showing humility instead of brandishing authority, and always looking to enhance the development of their staff members in ways that unlock potential, creativity and sense of purpose" (Tarallo, 2018, para. 2). Organizations that adopt the servant leadership style focus on their employees' and stakeholders' needs above their own to determine organizational priorities and goals.

Developing inclusive leadership as a practice requires individuals to be proactive in taking action towards policies and procedures that meet the needs of others and take personal responsibility for diversity and inclusion outcomes by speaking up to ensure every member of the organization feels connected (Bourke & Dillion, 2016). Servant leadership mirrors similar behavior by encouraging employees to participate in non-conforming positive and ethical behavior within the organization, or positive deviant behavior (PDB) (Brière et al., 2021). Members of organizations that work under servant leadership feel a strong sense of motivation because they are receiving the direct support they need to succeed.

Lee et al. (2020) describe leaders that implement servant leadership have a dependency on trust, procedural justice, and social exchanges between both team members and the leader. Inclusive practices attempt to "view their people through a very human lens, understanding their individuality and demonstrating empathy and genuine concern for their well-being" (Dillion & Sable, 2021). Both ideas complement each other by creating a workplace environment where relationships are valued because people are treated like people first above anything else. Inclusive leaders that use elements of servant leadership can motivate and inspire individuals to reach the organization's goals and create pathways for individuals to achieve their own personal successes. Although Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs should not be strictly followed based on which need should come first or last for every person, members of organizations need their physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs to be met before they are able to demonstrate their authentic and best work ethic (*Organizational Behavior*, 2017). Lee et al. 's (2020) explanation of the characteristics of a servant leader focuses on developing policies that support and reflect organizational members' needs at all levels.

Effectiveness

Brière et al.'s research (2021) used online surveys to explore the connections between servant leadership styles and innovative PDBs when problem-solving and supporting others. Results from the study examined how servant leadership can influence ethical and innovative behavior and help develop critical thinkers for positive change. These types of behaviors with servant leadership can play a role in satisfying psychological basic needs and promoting intrinsic motivation for individuals within the organization. Kiker et al. (2019) also discovered similar concepts when exploring servant leadership, "The servant leader tries to prepare the organization and its members for great contributions to the broader society and seeks to build a better community both inside and outside of the organization" (p. 174). As inclusive leaders reflect on the purpose behind their actions and decisions, one must ask themselves if they are contributing to creating an inclusive society for diverse experiences. Understanding how utilizing aspects of servant leadership is essential in the overall work towards being an advocate for change can have a greater influence on how we collaborate with and develop members of organizations. Inclusive leaders that use servant leadership as a guide to foster a collaborative environment will be able to avoid power struggles between managers and team members by taking the traditional power leadership model and creating a new hierarchy where employees' and stakeholders' needs are leading decision-making processes.

Zubairu's (2020) research analyzed servant leadership across different time and geographic distributions, article types, and data collection methods, and throughout each there was significant empirical evidence that servant leadership had a positive impact on members of organizations. Similar to the themes referenced in Brière et al's (2021) and Kiker et al.'s (2019) findings, Zubairu (2020) stated that this leadership style "inspires followers to develop deep

levels of trust in their leaders, which in turn encourages them to give their best efforts in ensuring that servant leaders are able to continue to help identify and fulfill the needs of the followers" (p. 68). When employees feel that they are in a workplace environment where their authentic selves, ideas, and needs are equally recognized and respected, it will empower them to continue the same type of behavior in their own work and relationships within and outside the organization.

Challenges

Although servant leadership is often recognized as providing opportunities for organizations to support employee needs and increase positive outcomes and performance, using it exclusively as one's leadership style may cause unnecessary conflict. With servant leadership, the leader may find themselves in an exhaustion phase where stressors have physically taken a toll on them due to the desire to address all the needs of both the organization and each member in it (*Organizational Behavior*, 2017). Inclusive leaders understand that they have to listen attentively to concerns and stressors that their teams may be facing. This should include being self-aware of their own emotions and adjusting their leadership style to better balance their self-management and workload to better lead. Strong and trusting relationships within the organization can help distribute the responsibilities, keeping in mind equitable exchanges, and will provide others with opportunities to continue to grow professionally.

Servant leaders may also find it difficult to align the needs of the employees to the needs of the organization. If the leader's conflict management skills are not adequate enough to problem-solve compromises and accommodate in certain situations, then their decision-making processes may come off as inconsistent or unproductive to certain groups. Tarallo (2018) explains, "The servant leader moves beyond the transactional aspects of management, and instead actively seeks to develop and align an employee's sense of purpose with the company

mission" (Tarallo, 2018, para. 6). For inclusive leaders, this means that the mission and vision of the organization need to be representative of the organizational community they are serving. Otherwise, servant leadership is being used for the sake of creating outcomes instead of using it as an inclusive practice to better support diverse voices and experiences within the organization.

Conclusion: Development of an Inclusive Leader

The journey towards developing inclusive leadership as a practice is an ongoing and ever-changing process. As society continues to evolve and change, leaders striving to embed diversity and inclusion into the practices, policies, and procedures in their organization will need to be approached from a situational leadership lens. Solely relying on one type of leadership style can not be the best practice for an inclusive leader because organizations are made up of various personalities, identities, and work ethics. Understanding how one's ideas and behaviors influence others will help determine when and how the democratic and servant leadership styles should be used.

Reflecting on which style should be used more dominantly than the other will depend on the type of organization one is leading and how employees are responding to each style's decision-making processes. As Bourke and Dillion (2016) state in their six signature traits of an inclusive leader, "Highly inclusive leaders are committed to diversity and inclusion because these objectives align with their personal values" (p. 8). Understanding one's own personal values and goals will help weave together elements and characteristics from both leadership styles. This can be more beneficial for the organization as a whole because it will assist in creating a more individualized workplace environment while also nurturing a community that can rely on and learn from one another. Applying the democratic and servant leadership styles

situationally can both be an inclusive way for a leader to foster a workplace environment where

diverse individuals are celebrated, supported, and equally heard.

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