Servant leadership: An Opponent-Process Model and the Revised Servant Leadership Profile

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This paper attempts to resolve the paradox of servant leadership (SL). It first seeks to remove the concern that one has to give up power in order to practice servant leadership by recognizing the legitimate use of various bases of social power. It then describes a multidimensional model of servant leadership and the Servant Leadership Profile. As a result of taking into account authoritarian hierarchy and egotistic pride as two main forces antithetical to the implementation of SL, an opponent-process model (OP) is proposed. According to the OP model, the presence of SL is predicated on the absence of authoritarian hierarchy and egotistic pride. Finally, the paper introduces the Revised Servant Leadership Profile that is based on the OP model and then discusses its practical implications.

Interest in servant leadership has increased in recent years. Conferences, courses, publications, and programs promoting servant leadership (SL) have multiplied. Most of the companies at the top of Fortune Magazine's best companies to work for in America have adopted some aspects of SL. There are at least two reasons for its resurgence: (1) SL is part of the larger movement away from command-and-control leadership towards participatory and process-oriented leadership in the IT-based economy, and (2) SL holds the promise of an ethical and socially responsible management and leadership as an antidote to corporate scandals.

In Christian circles, the main appeal of SL is that it is biblically based and modeled after Jesus Christ. Secondly, it provides a lofty vision and a powerful purpose for Christian ministry. Denominations and churches see SL not only as the biblical model for leadership, but also as a rally cry for recruiting and training Christian leaders.

For example, the Fellowship Training Agency of The Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches of Canada has adopted the strategy to "uncover potential Reproducing Servant Leaders right in their own local congregations." Their main thrust is to discover, recruit and train potential servant leaders in each congregation, so that in the future they will in turn repeat the same process of developing potential servant leaders.

The Practice of SL

No one has ever questioned the value of SL. How can one deny the benefits of having competent leaders who are also caring, honest and empowering? However, many leaders, including Christian leaders, have questioned the practicality of implementing SL within their work environment. Dave Goetz (2000) has identified the crux of the

problem: "One key question for me is how power and servant leadership interact. Do you have to give up power to be a servant leader?"

The obvious answer is no. By definition, leaders possess various bases of power, without which no leader can function. In addition to French and Raven's (2001) five sources of power (i.e., reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert). Hersey, Blanchard, & Natemeyer (2001) have included connection and information as additional bases of power; they also presented a situational leadership model. According to this model, effective use of various power bases depends on the maturity level of followers. For example, coercive power may be most effective with immature workers, who "are both unable and unwilling to take responsibility" (p.323).

The paradox of servant leadership

The concern that servant leadership means giving up power stems from the seeming oxymoron that one can be a humble servant and at the same time wield a big stick. This apparent contradiction in terms can be easily resolved by recognizing that good leaders, including servant leaders, use a variety of social powers; they will resort to coercive power only in dealing with immature and irresponsible workers.

We also need to address the underlying anxiety of losing power and losing the coveted position of leadership. Leaders, who are opposed to the SL practice of sharing power and empowering others, fear that subordinates may use this newfound freedom and power against the leadership. In order to feel secure in their position, they resort to coercive tactics to keep subordinates under control. Paradoxically, abuse of power

only increases their sense of insecurity, because they will soon discover that their potential to attract and influence followers actually decreases in proportion to their attempt to control through intimidation, deception and manipulation. The reality is that no one likes to be controlled, and therefore no one can control others. The psychology of reactance is an important consideration.

The paradox of SL (Rinehart, 1998) is that leaders can actually increase their potential to influence through intentional vulnerability and voluntary humility, as demonstrated by Jesus, who "made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant…he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross." (Phil.2: 7-8). The emptying (kenosis) of himself did not diminish his leadership position, nor did it prevent him from exercising his power as Lord over nature, over diseases, and over the religious establishment.

Right after washing his disciples feet (John 13:5), Jesus said: "You call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet" (John 13:13).

Jesus is equally at home with the exercise of power and the humility of servanthood. Since we are called to follow his steps, we need to find out both theoretically and practically how servanthood and leadership co-exist and how humility and power interact with each other.

In this paper, we will first introduce a conceptual framework of SL, introduce the Servant Leadership Profile, and finally, we propose an opponent-process model of SL and present some

preliminary findings based on the Revised Servant Leadership Profile.

A Multidimensional Model of SL

Table1 shows the original conceptual framework Page and Wong (2000) have developed. It is a multidimensional model, which recognizes 12 SL attributes based on prior literature and the authors' personal experiences in leadership. These attributes can be conceptually classified into four orientations, which cover the four fundamental, functional processes in leadership according to the management literature.

Table 1
A Conceptual Framework for Measuring Servant Leadership

I. Character-Orientation (Being: What kind of person is the leader?)

Concerned with cultivating a servant's attitude, focusing on the leader's values, credibility and motive.

- Integrity
- Humility
- Servanthood

II. People-Orientation (Relating: How does the leader relate to others?)

Concerned with developing human resources, focusing on the leader's relationship with people and his/her commitment to develop others.

- Caring for others
- Empowering others
- Developing others

III. Task-Orientation (Doing: What does the leader do?)

Concerned with achieving productivity and success, focusing on the leader's tasks and skills necessary for success.

- Visioning
- Goal setting
- Leading

IV. Process-Orientation (Organizing: How does the leader impact organizational processes?)

Concerned with increasing the efficiency of the organization, focusing the leader's ability to model and develop a flexible, efficient and open system.

- Modeling
- Team building
- Shared decision-making

Figure 1

EXPANDING CIRCLES OF SERVANT LEADERS
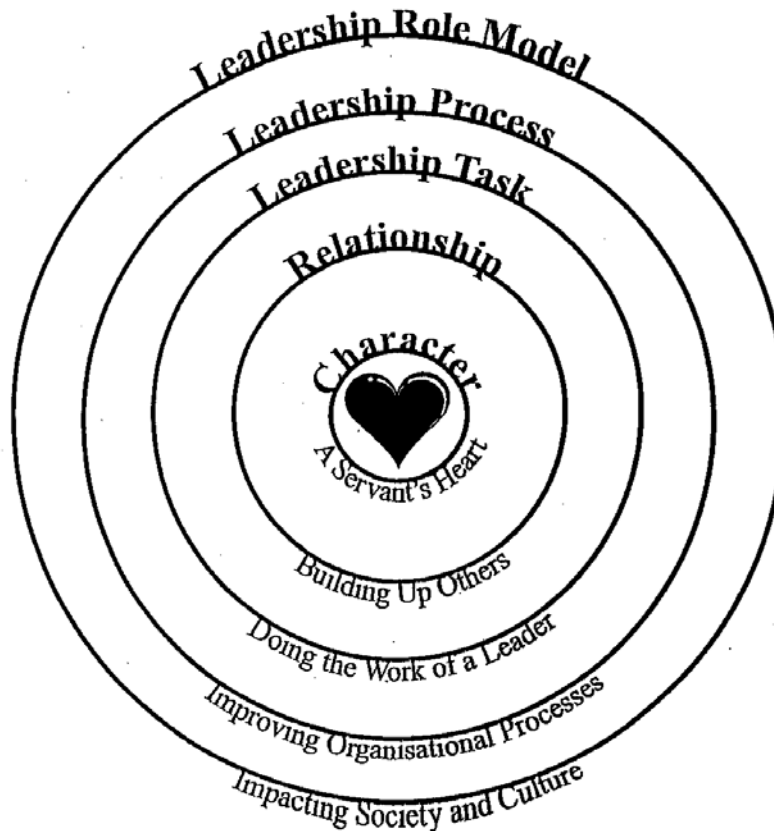
The impact of the multidimensional model can be represented as ever expanding concentric circles as shown in Figure 1. The heart and soul of SL is concerned with the **Character-orientation**, to be followed by **people-orientation**, **task-orientation**, **and process-orientation**. These circles represent the sequence in the development, practice and influence of SL. According to this model, it is impossible for one to perform the leadership task as a SL, unless one has developed a servant' heart, and knows how to develop and empower others.

The last circle indicates the wider impact of SL on society and culture.

The Servant Leadership Profile

We developed a 99-item Servant Leadership Profile, which consisted of 12 subscales. The details of item generation and item selection are provided in Page and Wong (2000). A factor analysis was performed based on a fairly large sample size of 1157 subjects. The result yielded 8 factors: **Leading, Servanthood, Visioning, Developing Others, Team-Building, Empowering Others, Shared Decision Making and Integrity.**

Four of the 12 a priori factors failed to emerge, because items belonging to these four factors either double-loaded or spread across several un-interpretable factors, which contained one or two items only. The four eliminated factors were: **Humility, Caring for Others, Goal Setting, and Modeling.**

Our eight remaining factors were similar to the SL characteristics developed by other researchers. For example, James Laud's (1998) 66-item Organizational Leadership Assessment was designed to measure 3 perspectives: (1) the organization as a whole, (2) its top leadership, and (3) each participant's personal experience. The instrument covers six areas of SL characteristics: Value People, Develop People, Build Community, Display Authenticity, Provide Leadership and Share Leadership.

Basically, SL covers two areas: Servanthood and Leadership. With respect to **servanthood** aspects, **the leader develops the people, who help build the organization**. The focus here is on the leader's character and desire to serve. With respect to the **leadership** part, **the leader builds the organization by effectively using people as resources**; the emphasis here is on leadership skills, such as vision-casting and team-building.

Since most of the attributes and skills of SL can be learned, why is it so difficult to practice servant leadership? Why is it so rare to find a true servant leader? Is there something unrealistic with our conceptualization of SL? Since Christian leaders are supposed to be followers of Christ, why is it so difficult to find true servant leaders in Christian organizations?

Perceived limitations of SL in a Christian context

The President of a large Christian organization is very honest about this dilemma: he has adopted SL as one of the core values for his organization, yet he insists that SL does not apply to him or his senior management. His reasoning is that he has to maintain power and control over his subordinates. "This is the only way to ensure that the organization would not go astray," he explains, "When there is no strict control, there would be chaos and secularization."

This is by no means an isolated incident. According to Robert Benne (2001), some orthodox Christian colleges resort to "the kind of reactionary responses to secular learning in which a rigid biblicism or repristinating confessionalism holds sway" (p.142). When a President is held accountable to a very conservative and narrowly sectarian Board, which demands that the stringent orthodoxy of the sponsoring denomination be maintained at any cost, the President would feel fully justified to adopt coercive and oppressive measures. In such cases, servanthood is sacrificed in the name of orthodoxy.

A similar pattern exists in churches. Many senior pastors would endorse servant leadership and recognize God as the Head of the church, but then point out that the church is also a human organization, and as such, it needs a strong human leader, who has complete control over every aspect of the operation of the church, to ensure that nothing goes wrong. Their justification is the same as presidents of orthodox Christian colleges – they are responsible for everything; if they do not exercise strict control, secularism or liberalism

will creep in and they would be blamed if anything goes wrong.

Barriers to SL

What are the *real* barriers to SL? Why are presidents of orthodox Christian colleges and pastors deeply worried about the dangers of practicing SL? What makes them think that they would fail or even lose their positions, if they do not keep everything under control? Is this anxiety rooted in their pessimistic view of human nature? Do they see all workers as immature and sinful human beings who need to be controlled through coercive power? If this is indeed the case, how can they trust themselves with so much power?

There are indeed many theological and psychological reasons for some leaders' reluctance to embrace SL. In the final analysis, there are only two real barriers: authoritarian hierarchy and egotistic pride.

Authoritarian hierarchy vs. servant leadership

One obvious reason why servant leadership does not work is that it cannot flourish in a hierarchical organization. The organizational structure needs to be changed from hierarchical to horizontal and participatory in order to accommodate SL. New wine needs new wineskins.

While business corporations, especially the "dotcom" companies, are moving towards a flattened structure, leaders in religious organizations still prefer an authoritarian, hierarchical structure. We hasten to add that you can have a servant leader in a highly hierarchical organization, just as you can have an authoritarian leader in a non-hierarchical organization. However, the authoritarian leadership style is more likely to flourish within a tall rather than a flat organizational structure.

One reason for the prevalence of authoritarian hierarchy (AH) in religious organizations is that religion is linked to divine authority or divine revelation. Theologically, God is the Head, the CEO. Thus, governance is based on theocracy. However, in practice, divine authority is administered and mediated by a hierarchy of human authorities called by God. Therefore, AH seems to be the only appropriate system of governance, which offers the best protection of religious orthodoxy and divine authority. The theology of AH proves to be a hidden and yet formidable barrier to the practice of SL.

From the perspective of managerial science, an authoritarian, dictatorial system is counterproductive, because it only serves to ensure the longevity of incompetent, unethical and unpopular leaders. To succeed in such a system, leaders only need to perfect two sets of skills:

(a) They want to do everything necessary to demonstrate their loyalty and submission towards to their boss; their main concern is not what is good for the organization, but what will please their boss in order to win his or her trust.

(b) They demand the same kind of loyalty and servitude from subordinates through intimation, deception and manipulation.

These two sets of skills can be best acquired and practiced by individuals without real talents or integrity. Ironically, emotionally intelligence can do more harm than good, when it

becomes part of the arsenal used to perpetuate power.

The cost of such a hierarchical system is enormous, because it will not only prevent people from making creative contributions, but also turn away talented creative people from joining or staying with the organization. Furthermore, much time and energy are wasted in playing office politics. This system cannot succeed in the long run, because of the corruption of power and continuous exit of talented, disgruntled workers.

In essence, an AH system is similar to the old feudalism and various forms of dictatorship, which do not belong to the 2lst century. In Christendom, such system dates back to medieval Roman Catholicism. Abuse of power inevitably leads to scandals and corruption. Organized religion is often dismissed as irrelevant and immoral precisely because of its system of authoritarian hierarchical control.

Given the many obvious evils of AH, why is it that so many Christian leaders still cling to it as if it were their only lifeline? Basically, their distrust in SL stems from their own insecurity and egotism. They do not have the confidence that others will follow them, if they cannot exercise coercive power indiscriminately.

Opponents of SL may point out that a participatory, democratic leadership style creates openings for those power hungry and self-serving individuals, who may try to subvert and take over the leadership. However, we don't need to resort to authoritarian hierarchy to get rid of un-cooperative power-grabbers on the basis of in-subordination. There are more effective ways to prevent and deal with self-serving power-hungry individuals.

Firstly, servant leaders set the tone and educate workers regarding the importance of team-work, group spirit, shared vision, and personal responsibility, which may be included in the contract. Secondly, conflicts are resolved by following agreed upon due processes and spiritual principles. Therefore, anyone who intentionally and persistently challenges the leadership for selfish political gains can be dismissed for poor performance, and contractual violation rather than insubordination. Thirdly, a horizontal structure will work when the leader has already earned the trust and respect of followers. In other words, a servant leader needs greater leadership skills, especially in the area of relationship in order to function effectively in a flattened organization.

Critics of SL may also argue that participatory democracy makes it difficult for leaders to make tough but unpopular decisions. Our counterargument is that servant leaders are better suited in making such decisions because they consult widely, present compelling reasons for the decision and assume full responsibility for any negative consequences. They do not need to surprise people with an arbitrary decree; nor do they need to demand obedience on pain of dismissal. Such coercive tactics only breed discontent and drive good people away. In short, when leaders cultivate respect, responsibility, accountability and shared-decision-making, there is no need to depend on AH.

To overcome the barrier of needing an authoritarian hierarchy to lead an organization, leaders need to take the risk of intentional vulnerability – willing

to lose their job and even lose their life in serving others as Jesus did. They overcome a sense of insecurity by embracing it in serving a higher purpose.

Egotistic Pride vs. Servant Leadership

Another difficulty in practicing servant leadership in America is that we are in a culture of individualism and competitiveness which foster egotistic pride. The Founding Fathers were correct in creating a system of checks and balances, because they were fully aware of the dangers of egotism and corruption of power.

Individualism coupled with authoritarian hierarchy has proven to be a fertile ground for egotistical, arrogant leaders. When there are no checks and balances, self-serving leaders are free to elevate themselves and expand their territory of influence. Such egotistical leaders can be found mostly in hierarchical religious organizations.

The celebrity syndrome, the pedestal syndrome and rankism are just some of the symptoms of egotism running rampant in hierarchical organizations. The leaders exude power and success, and carry themselves as the "king of the hill". They demand to be the center of attention, and claim credits, which are due to others. They will use whatever means necessary to achieve numerical and material success, just as they will do anything to perpetuate their grip on power. Egotism is opposite to SL, which is based on self-giving rather than self-serving.

Modeling after Jesus, Paul's ministry is based on self-giving. He claims: "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing

greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake, I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ" (Phil.3: 7-8). To the church at Corinth, he admitted, "I am nothing" (2 Cor.12: 11) and pledged, "I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well" (2 Cor.12: 15).

How many Christian leaders are willing to follow the steps of Jesus Christ and Apostle Paul? How many Christian leaders are willing to derive their sense of significance and fulfillment from knowing Christ and making him known?

Servant leadership is transcendental (Sanders et al., 2003), not only because it is concerned with a higher influence and a higher power, but also because it transcends self-interests in the service of others. To practice SL, leaders need to empty themselves and their pride, their selfishness and worldly aspirations. In other words, acquiring attitudes and behaviours of humility is not enough. SL demands the radical step of sacrificing self-interest and dying with Christ on the cross.

An Opponent-Process Model of SL

Based on the above analysis, the two opposing forces to SL are authoritarian hierarchy and egotistical pride. These are the evil twins, which have consistently hindered and undermined the implementation of SL. These evils are cancerous – they will grow and grow until an organization becomes terminally ill; they are probably the two major causes of organizational decline and failure.

Power can be addictive and intoxicating. Once bitten by the power bug, it is difficult to get rid of it. Entrenched power will do everything humanly

possible to maintain it, because power means privileges, prestige, money, and the ability to coerce others to do one's bidding. History is replete with evidence that people are willing to go to the extent of killing their family members in order to seize the throne. In contemporary society, people continue to sacrifice and betray others to secure their own positions. Of all the things the world offers, there is probably nothing more irresistible than power.

But the root of craving for power is insecurity – the fear that without power, one will be vulnerable to attack and mistreatment. SL counters by pointing out that power is a false answer to security, because true security rests in the transcendental reality of God.

Similarly, pride is a deep-seated problem, originating from our basic need for personal significance and worthiness. Unfortunately, it has manifested itself in the incessant greed for fame, wealth and recognition. SL points out that worldly success is false answer to significance, because true significance is realized in serving God and serving others.

According to our opponent-process (OP) model, the presence of an authoritarian hierarchy (AH) and egotistic pride (EP) means the absence of SL. No amount of praying, training and promotion can be effective in implementing SL, as long as the evils of AH and EP remain unchecked.

So many leaders and organizations believe in SL, but there is a disconnection between their beliefs and behaviours, simply because they are not willing to address the evils of abusive power and egotistic pride. The situation will never improve, until definite steps

are taken to remove any traces of AH and EP.

Thus, the OP model is transformational: there needs to be a personal transformation in top leadership before they can transform the organization. The OP model not only explains why SL is so rare, but also points out the difficult pathway to achieving it – the way of the cross. SL requires the courage of intentional vulnerability and voluntary surrender of one's ego.

The Revised Servant Leadership Profile

The above OP model dictates the need to include two new subscales, Abuse of Power and Egotistic Pride, which measure attitudes and practices representative of AH and EP; the items were generated according to the literature and our own experiences with authoritarian and egotistic leaders. In RSLP, AH is equated with the abuse of power. When the items in the Power and Pride Subscales are scored in the reverse, then these two subscales reflect Intentional Vulnerability and Voluntary Humility.

We also have created additional items to the remaining 8 subscales, resulting in 97 items. The Revised Servant Leadership Profile (RSLP) comprises 10 subscales – 8 represent the presence of SL characteristics, and 2 represent attributes antithetic to SL. Both positive and negative components need to be taken into account in predicting various outcome measures, such as morale, work satisfaction, work stress and productivity.

The major difference between RSLP and the original SLP is that all items in the RSLP were randomized so that the resulting factors would not be biased by the *a priori* classification as was the case

for SLP. Another difference was that the Original SLP was administered through paper-and-pencil test while the RSLP was administered online through Surveymonkey.com.

We have administered the RSLP to 165 participants through the online

Surveymonkey.com. These subjects represent leaders in all walks of life. Factor analysis with varimax rotation has yielded 8 interpretable factors. The result is shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Factors of the RSLP and representatives Items

Factor 1 Developing and Empowering Others

- Item 61. I am always looking for hidden talents in my workers.

- Item 72. I continuously appreciate, recognize and encourage the work of others

Factor 2. Power and Pride (Vulnerability and Humility)

- Item 83. To be a strong leader, I need to keep all my subordinates under control.

- Item 93.   It is important that I am seen as superior to my subordinates in everything.

Factor 3. Visionary Leadership

- Item 32. I am able to inspire others with my enthusiasm and confidence in what can be accomplish.

- Item 42. I am able to present a vision that is readily and enthusiastically embraced by others.

Factor 4. Servanthood

- Item 1. I am willing to maintain a servant's heart, even though some people may take advantage of my servant leadership style.

- Item 77. I am willing to make personal sacrifices in serving others.

Factor 5. Responsible Leadership

- Item 62. I don't blame others when things go badly, and I don't claim all the credit when things go well.

- Item 68. I have a good understanding of what is happening inside the organization

Factor 6. Integrity (Honesty)

- Item 10. I always keep my promises and commitments to others.

- Item 22. I want to build trust through honesty and empathy.

Factor 7. Integrity (Authenticity)

- Item 47. I practice what I preach.

- Item 65. My actions are consistent with my convictions.

Factor 8. Courageous Leadership

- Item 79. Having widely consulted others and carefully considered all the options, I do not hesitate in making difficult decisions.

- Item 39. I have the moral courage to do the right thing, even when it hurts me politically.

Since the present study was based on only 165 subjects, I suspect that factors may not be completely replicated with a larger sample. Still, the result is very informative because it provides a simple but clear portrait of SL. The merging of Power and Pride subscales into a single factor supports the argument that AH and EP are inseparable evil twins. It is worth noting that **leadership** is characterized as being **visionary, responsible and courageous**. Apart from the desire to serve, **servanthood** is characterized by **honesty** and **authenticity**. These are the defining characteristics of SL.

Implementation of SL

It is time for implementing SL, if we want our organizations to prosper in a time of great uncertainty and intense global competition. Unless we have the courage to confront and tackle the evils of AH and EP in our organizations, we can talk about SL for a hundred years and still cannot see a single fruit.

The OP model sheds new lights on how we can best implement SL in an organization. This can be done at least on two fronts: leadership training as well as grassroots workers education.

With respect to leadership training, seminars, leadership and business management programs need to develop curricula that address the dangers of AH and EP in terms of organizational structure and corporate governance. Courses on ethical issues, leadership styles, and organization design can all include a component of SL.

With respect to grassroots workers education, they need to be taught both the values of SL as well as the dangers of AH and EP. They need to learn the danger of blind obedience to authority,

including religious authority. We want to borrow Neil Postman's (1993) conception of a loving resistance fighter in combating the excesses of Technopoly. Workers need to find effective way of giving expression to their resistance to leadership that is based on AH and EP. Authoritarian leaders will continue to abuse their power, as long as workers remain passive and servile. The loving aspect of resistance means that in spite of the pain and confusion caused by leaders' AH and EP, workers need to affirm their belief in SL and follow the steps of Christ and Apostle Paul regardless of what their bosses do.

Lao Tzu states, "A leader is best when people barely know that he exists. Not so good when people obey and acclaim him. Worse when they despise him. If you fail to honour people they fail to honour you. But of a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will all say, We did this ourselves." Lao Tzu understands the power of SL.

Another strategy to implement SL is through community building. All organizations recognize that community is a good thing – good for morale and good for productivity. Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner (1993) have pointed out that: " In a productive work community, leaders are not commanders and controllers, bosses and big shots. They are supporters, partners and providers"(p.7.). We cannot establish such a community without replacing AH with shared leadership. Peck (1997) also emphasizes that in building a genuine community, "control is relinquished and traditional hierarchy is set aside" (p.72).

Some Duke University professors have described the ideal workplace as a

"partnership of free people committed to the care and nurturing of each other's mind, body, heart, and soul through participatory means" (Naylor, et al. 1996. p.1.). The ten defining characteristics of community in the workplace as outlined in Table 3 are based on Naylor, et al., 1966, pp. 1-8.)

Table 3
Defining Characteristics of Community in the Workplace

1. Shared vision developed as a shared vision of the future.

2. *Common values* that are mutually identified and upheld.

3. *Boundaries* for keeping the organization's tension under control in order to assure the collective commitment to the shared vision and values.

4. Empowerment involving the creation of a system of governance and a community decision making process which enables all community members to share equally in setting the direction and influencing the organization.

5. *Responsibility sharing* through cooperation, team building, and participation.

6. Growth and development strategies to foster spiritual, intellectual, and emotional growth and development that will produce psychological well-being.

7. Tension reduction through conflict management both internally as well as with external communities.

8. Education and training in shared community values, decision-making, governance, responsibility, growth and development, and tension reduction.

9. Feedback, which continuously monitors and corrects community performance against stated objectives.

10. Friendship in an environment that encourages friendships to develop among mangers, among employees, and between managers and employees.

It is quite obvious that such a productive genuine community is possible only when we eliminate the evils of AH and EP.

Having pointed out the difficulties in implementing SL, because of the evils of AH and EP, we want to end on a positive note. Indeed, we have seen companies and Christian ministries, which have successfully implemented SL. Here are some of the examples.

In Synovus Financial Corporation headquartered in Columbus, Georgia, every new employee is acquainted with the tenets of SL on the very first day on the job and encouraged to hold all leaders in the organization accountable to these tenets.

In Christian ministry, it is embodied in the Senior Pastor's Team Covenant of the Evangelical Free Church of Lethbridge, Alberta. In Christian higher education, SL is practiced in Abilene Christian University in Texas, at Union University in Tennessee, and Huntington College in Indiana. All these institutions have followed Jesus' example in SL.

Now is the time for others in Christian ministry to follow a Biblical model of leadership (Blanchard, Hybels & Hodges (1999). The alternative is to face becoming irrelevant in the 21st century. The take-home message for this paper is that to practice SL, we need to guard against the evil of AH and EP.

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