

Job Satisfaction and the Priority of Valuing People: A Case Study of Servant Leadership Practice in a Network of Family-Owned Companies

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Abstract

The servant leadership literature has a growing body of evidence pointing to the positive relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction. Because many of these studies have focused on quantitative analyses of the subject, the present study brings a complementary qualitative perspective. This article presents the findings of a case study focused on the servant leadership practices of the McNeff family in their network of family-owned companies in Anoka, Minnesota. Using the six servant leadership themes developed by Laub, the study focused on interviews with the owners and survey results from employees. The researchers found that the servant leadership practices of the owners are contributing to the job satisfaction of the employees. In addition, the researchers found evidence to suggest that the theme of valuing people may have a disproportionately strong effect on the culture of a business or organization, and serve as the foundation on which other servant leadership behaviors may occur.

Keywords

leadership, organizational behavior, management, social sciences, social sciences business communication, entrepreneurship/small business, social sciences economic development, economic science, industrial and labor relations, organizational communication, social issues in management, strategic management organizational theory and business policy

Introductory Information

In this article, the researchers present a case study of servant leadership being practiced in a network of family-owned companies in Anoka, Minnesota. The companies are owned by Larry and Marie McNeff along with their son, Clayton McNeff. This research was inspired by a tour of their facilities at SarTec, an agricultural specialty products and service company. The visit was unrelated to research but the primary researcher was impressed with the overall atmosphere of the company and with the work being done at SarTec in creating biodiesel using the recently patented Mcgyan® process (www.Mcgyan.com). In July of 2009, the primary researcher began work at Bethel Seminary on a doctor of ministry degree in servant leadership for team and organizational effectiveness. He was, once again, a guest of the McNeffs. Now looking at organizations through a servant leadership lens he observed that the McNeffs were practicing a number of servant leadership behaviors as owners of their companies.

Focus of the Study

The focus of the study was to identify the servant leadership behaviors of the company owners and to discover how their

servant leadership practices have contributed to worker satisfaction in their companies. Together the McNeffs have formed six family-owned companies that employ 65 people. The companies are listed in Table 1.

Family Background

Larry McNeff holds a BS degree in chemistry from the University of Nebraska. Marie McNeff holds an EdD degree also from the University of Nebraska. Clayton McNeff holds a PhD from the University of Minnesota in Analytical Chemistry. From 1967 to 1979, Larry McNeff worked for a large company doing research and development of cattle feed formulas. From 1979 to 1983, he worked as a marketing representative for another company. In 1983, he started the first family company called SarTec, which produces a cattle feed supplement using an extract from the yucca plant. The “Sar” in the company name comes from sarsaponin which is

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Table 1. Companies Owned by McNeff Family.

Company name	Company description
SarTec	Agriculture specialty products and services
Ever Cat Fuels, LLC	Biodiesel fuel producer
Mcgyan Biodiesel, LLC	Biodiesel technology provider
ZirChrom Separations, Inc.	Chromatography (separation science)
MRC	Intellectual property company
Marla Properties	Property management company

a group of compounds in the yucca extract. The “Tec” stands for technology. The company has grown and now produces several animal feed products using this technology. The products have proven to be a natural way to reduce bloat in cattle and horses.

Marie McNeff retired from Augsburg College in Minneapolis in 2000 after serving for 28 years as a faculty member and for 5 years as the dean of faculty. Immediately after retirement, she began the service of making lunch for all of the employees in the SarTec facility. The company has become known for this service.

ZirChrom Separations, Inc., is a company started by Clayton McNeff in 1995 following his PhD work at the University of Minnesota. ZirChrom manufactures zirconia-based high performance chromatographic materials for the analytical analysis of compounds primarily by high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). In 2006, because of his work in separation sciences, Clayton was invited to help in research being conducted at Augsburg College by a student named Brian Krohn, who was working on a project to discover a clean way to produce biodiesel fuel. This research brought him together with Arlin Gyberg and Ben Yan. Gyberg is a professor of analytical chemistry at Augsburg College and was assisting Krohn in his project. Gyberg suggested bringing McNeff into the research because of McNeff’s work in separation sciences and catalysts. Yan was working as the chief scientist at SarTec. This partnership resulted in the Mcgyan® process which converts alcohol in combination with vegetable oil or animal tallow into biodiesel in a continuous, no waste process (Ever Cat Fuels, 2011). This discovery led to the creation of Ever Cat Fuels LLC and Mcgyan Biodiesel LLC. In 2009, the family opened a biodiesel plant in Isanti, Minnesota, which uses the Mcgyan process.

The primary researcher is related to the McNeffs. This possible bias was mitigated by the inclusion of another researcher and by the use of an anonymous survey taken by the employees of the McNeff companies.

Literature Review

Servant leadership has established a solid foundation in theory and practice. Built upon the work of Robert K. Greenleaf

(1977), individuals like Laub (1999), Page and Wong (2000), Spears (1995), Patterson (2003), Winston (2003), and Irving (2011) have proposed theoretical models to capture the essence of servant leadership. For Greenleaf (2002),

The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from the one who is leader first. (p. 27)

Greenleaf followed this with questions to test servant leadership: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (p. 27). Such questions serve as a foundation for the present study. The researchers in this study were interested in observing the impact of servant leadership on the employees of a network of family-owned companies. Because of this, the theme of servant leadership’s impact on job satisfaction is of particular interest to the researchers.

Laub (2004) defines servant leadership as “an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader” (p. 81). This emphasis on “the good of those led” is what sets servant leadership apart from other leadership models, and serves as a foundation for theoretical connections between servant leadership and variables like follower commitment, leader trust, organizational trust, and job satisfaction.

On such connections, we note the following key arguments from the literature.

Patterson (2003) presented a theoretical model that predicted servant leadership would produce a higher level of service by the followers. Winston (2003) extended the work of Patterson by predicting that servant leadership will not only result in greater service by the followers, but will also result in greater commitment to the leader by the followers. Errol and Winston (2005) found that perceptions of servant leadership correlated positively with both leader trust and organizational trust and that organizations perceived as servant-led exhibited higher levels of both leader trust and organizational trust than organizations perceived as non-servant-led. In an important cross-cultural study, West and Bocarnea (2008) found that the servant leadership constructs of service, humility, and vision contributed to organizational commitment and job satisfaction in American and Filipino settings.

The servant leadership literature has a growing body of evidence pointing to the positive relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction. Laub (1999) pointed to this relationship in the development of the Organizational Leadership Assessment. Irving identified a positive relationship between these variables in his study in the nonprofit sector (Irving, 2005), and in his study across multiple sectors (Irving, 2004). Hebert (2004) found a positive relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction in her study

Table 2. Employee Survey Questions Focused Around Laub's (1999) Servant Leadership Behaviors.

Question	Theoretical category
1. In what ways do the owners demonstrate that they value employees?	Valuing people
2. How do the owners develop people within this organization?	Developing people
3. How have the owners built a sense of community within this organization?	Building community
4. How do the owners of this company display authenticity (open and accountable, willingness to learn, demonstrating honesty and integrity)?	Displaying authenticity
5. How do the owners of this company provide leadership for you and the organization?	Providing leadership
6. In what ways do the owners of this company share leadership?	Sharing leadership
7. What additional thoughts would you like to share about your experience in this company and the owners?	Open-ended question

of 12 organizations from both the public and private sectors. Amadeo (2008) found this relationship in the health care industry. Kong (2007) found this in a church-based study. Thompson (2002), Miers (2004), Anderson (2005), Van Tassel (2006), and Svoboda (2008) all found positive relationships between servant leadership and job satisfaction in the education sector. And Drury (2004) and Chu (2008) found this positive relationship within the business sector, with Drury focused in manufacturing and Chu focused within a call center setting.

The present study expands this literature stream focused on the relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction. Because all of the above noted studies have focused on quantitative analyses of the relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction, the present study brings a complementary qualitative perspective on this relationship, and does so within a network of family own companies. As the positive relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction has been confirmed in many previous studies, the researchers in this study found it helpful to expand the literature stream focused on this relationship by looking at the qualitative dimensions to this positive relationship.

Method

This study focused on identifying servant leadership practices of the McNeff family in their network of companies in Anoka, Minnesota. Through personal interviews with the owners and survey data collected from organizational employees, an approach of theoretical coding was used to identify servant leadership practice in the McNeff companies around Laub's (1999) six servant leadership behaviors.

Data Collection

The data were collected by personal interviews with the owners, and by inviting organizational employees to a URL containing a web-based survey. The web-based survey was available for all employees in the organization beyond the owners, and a total of 10 employees responded. Utilizing this web-based format allowed for an electronically mediated

collection of the research data, and helped to provide both a convenient and anonymous method through which employees could respond. Table 2 lists the survey questions focused on Laub's (1999) servant leadership behaviors.

Data Analysis

The primary researcher approached the data obtained through the interview from a narrative inquiry perspective (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988). The primary researcher adopted this style of research because narrative theory is relational and admits to the phenomena of the researcher moving from emotional involvement with the subjects of the research to "slipping to cool observation" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 81). As a family member, the primary researcher was fully involved emotionally with the McNeffs. Through the interview transcript and through a 1-year time gap between the interview and writing, he was able to achieve a degree of objectivity. Additional objectivity was gained by the inclusion of a second researcher who has no relationship to the McNeff family. Polkinghorne observes, "Narrative creates its meaning by noting the contributions that actions and events make to a particular outcome and then configures these parts into a whole episode" (p. 6). In processing the interview experience, the primary researcher was looking for actions and events (the parts) that contributed to the servant leadership behavior he was observing (the whole). The researchers utilized theoretical coding of the interview data to determine what authentic themes were emerging that related to Laub's (1999) six servant leadership behaviors of valuing people, developing people, creating community, providing leadership, sharing leadership, and displaying authenticity.

The second source of data was obtained from the online survey completed by the employees of the McNeff companies. This provided another needed objective point of view for the research process. The primary researcher felt he was observing servant leadership in action on the part of the McNeffs. The survey would provide a triangulated data source to help confirm or refute the observations of the primary researcher. Furthermore, the responses to the survey

would reveal whether the employees were experiencing job satisfaction and would provide qualitative data related to the connection of the servant leadership being practiced by the company owners and the job satisfaction being experienced by the employees. Theoretical coding was also used for the analysis of the survey data.

Findings

Servant Leadership Themes

The primary researcher used Laub's six servant leadership behaviors to provide a framework for identifying servant leadership behaviors in the interview transcript. Laub's first servant leadership behavior is "valuing people." One of the reasons Larry McNeff left a large company to start his own company was because he felt that employees were not treated well. He said that he would see people get "tossed out just for the convenience of the company." He determined that when he started his own company, he would give people "more freedoms than they could have at a big company." Toward the end of the interview, Larry said,

Having a culture where you can treat people like a family is important. It makes it very difficult to part ways with family members. Occasionally we do have to part ways with an employee and that's not easy. And it shouldn't be easy. If it's an easy thing something is way wrong and most likely it's something wrong with management.

The McNeffs have been very successful in creating community in their companies. Marie McNeff makes lunches every day for the 45 employees who work at the SarTec facility. Despite having been dean of faculty at Augsburg College she does not consider cooking for people a "menial" task. Rather she feels it is "one of the most important things you can do for people." This practice has also served to build community within the company as the employees sit around a table daily with one another. Clayton added that this practice sets them apart. He said, "We've gotten a lot of mileage out of it. There's almost like a folklore now about it." He then related a story about a local newscaster who came to the SarTec facility to interview the founders of the Mcgyan process. When the reporter stepped out of his car the first thing he said was, "Is this where the good meals are?"

The McNeffs articulated the importance of developing people. Clayton McNeff remembers being included in family business decisions at the age of 13 years. He said that he felt empowered by his parents throughout his childhood and early teens. He credits his mother who had an educational philosophy of finding the strengths of students and then allowing them to work in their areas of strength. Clayton felt that his mother practiced this value with him. Clayton also remembers being included and empowered by his father when the family started the SarTec company. Clayton definitely feels he benefited from the development efforts of his

parents. This value of developing people has been continued by the McNeffs in their companies. They have established a policy of paying for the educational development of their employees. Larry stated, "Our company pays for employee educational improvement."

Providing leadership is another of Laub's servant leadership behaviors. One of the ways the McNeffs demonstrate this is through their insistence in product quality. When Larry McNeff started SarTec, one of his negative experiences with a larger company was that they were creating a cattle feed product that was actually hurting cattle. He said, "The [product] they were selling, the animals would over consume and they would croak!" As a result, when he started his own company it was important to make a product that the company could stand behind. When discussing company values he added,

[It was a value] to develop something that was worthwhile. To try to make the best product I could in the field that we're in. And I think I did that. So we had something we could really get behind.

Also related to providing leadership, Clayton McNeff described the value of modeling the behaviors that the owners desired from the employees. He also emphasized the leadership quality of teaching and encouraging problem solving on the part of the employees. Noting that several of their employees had come from larger companies where the culture discouraged independent thinking on the part of employees, Clayton gave examples of how the McNeffs encourage independent thinking to solve problems encountered by the employees on a day-to-day basis.

The McNeffs practice sharing leadership, which is another of Laub's servant leadership behaviors. Clayton talked about the importance of listening to employees and allowing their ideas to have the same weight as those of the owners. He said, "You don't always [have to] think that you're the person in the room who knows everything. [The] best ideas always go on the table and it doesn't matter where they come from."

Displaying authenticity is the final servant leadership behavior from Laub. In describing the importance of consistency Clayton McNeff observed, "You have to let your actions speak louder than your words." Larry McNeff said, "if you listen to your employees, they'll tell you what they think and you have to invite that and they'll be honest with you. You gotta know what they actually think." Larry also said, "Big companies are full of loopers and log rollers who don't want the other person to succeed." When asked by the interviewer what loopers and log rollers are Larry said,

A looper is a person who doesn't come straight with information or even a question but rather "loops" his or her way to you. A log roller is someone who doesn't want the guy over there to have the advantage so he rolls a few logs to kill a good idea of another person by questioning it to death.

Table 3. Occurrences of Laub's (1999) Servant Leadership Behaviors From Interview.

Servant leadership behaviors	Number of occurrences
Valuing people	15
Building community	11
Developing people	11
Displaying authenticity	11
Sharing leadership	7
Providing leadership	3

Very often the coding of the interview revealed two or more of Laub's servant leadership behaviors in combination with one another. For example, one of the statements in the interview was, "You don't always think that you're the person in the room who knows everything. The best ideas always go on the table and it doesn't matter where they come from." This statement reveals a combination of valuing people, and practicing authenticity. When there were combinations like this, the servant leadership behavior of valuing people appeared more often than any other servant leadership behavior. In fact, seven of the 15 occurrences of valuing people appeared in combination with another theme. It appeared 3 times in combination with developing people, 3 times in combination with building community, and once in combination with displaying authenticity.

Table 3 lists Laub's (1999) six servant leadership behaviors and the number of times each behavior was identified in the interview coding. The behaviors are listed in descending order of their occurrence in the interview.

Antecedents of Servant Leadership Practice From the Histories of the McNeffs

The interview revealed several contributing factors to Larry and Marie McNeff becoming servant leaders. First were their supportive family backgrounds that valued individuals and encouraged achievement. Next was Larry McNeff's negative experience working with a large food production company. He was displeased with the lack of empowerment given to workers and the lack of general care given to workers who encountered problems in their lives. He determined, upon starting his company, that his treatment of employees would reflect the value of human beings. The next factor was Marie McNeff's experience as an educator who approached her role with a personal value of empowerment for students. They also credited their servant leader attitudes to their Christian faith.

Clayton McNeff's path to servant leadership was largely a result of growing up in a home where he was encouraged to participate in making decisions about the family business when he was only 12 years old. As a child and teenager, he was influenced and empowered by his mother who approached his development as she would that of a student.

Another contributing factor was the chance he had to take a business trip with his father and seeing how his father treated others. He also was watching how his parents valued their employees. One of the ways they show this is through the lunches that Marie prepares every day. This willingness and even eagerness to serve her family and her employees had a great impact on Clayton.

Evidence of Servant Leadership Practices in the Businesses

The employees of the McNeff's companies validated the presence of all of Laub's servant leadership behaviors in their survey responses. Below are the survey questions with some representative comments from the employees.

Question 1 (Valuing People): In what ways do the owners demonstrate that they value employees?

- "They never make you feel less, they take interest in you and your family as people not just as an asset. They make decisions for the company with their employee's best interest in mind—not just the bottom line."
- "I have always been treated with great respect and always felt that my work was greatly valued."
- "The McNeff's treat employees like valued family members. This includes providing free lunches and paid health insurance benefits."
- "Owners show their employees that they are needed, and praise them for a job well done."
- "Everyone is treated with respect."

Question 2 (Developing People): How do the owners develop people within this organization?

- "Opportunities for growth and change are distributed within the organization."
- "Tuition reimbursement."
- "Management will provide guidance and support in order to encourage leadership development. Almost all promotions come from within the existing employee ranks."
- "They find employees strengths and assign job responsibilities accordingly."
- "Scheduled performance appraisals."

Question 3 (Building Community): How have the owners built a sense of community within this organization?

- "Annual Christmas party."
- "Birthday recognition."
- "By providing lunch every day. By always being available."
- "Cultural celebrations like Chinese New Year."

Question 4 (Displaying Authenticity): How do the owners of this company display authenticity (open and accountable, willingness to learn, demonstrating honesty and integrity)?

- “They value all suggestions for improvements and encourage each employee to provide suggestions. They deal honestly with all their employees.”
- “Customers know if SarTec commits to a program or plan of action they can plan on that commitment going forward.”
- “The owners are friendly and have made themselves approachable.”

Question 5 (Providing Leadership): How do the owners of this company provide leadership for you and the organization?

- “They continue to innovate and provide interesting new challenges for their employees.”
- “Implementations of employee’s suggestions for improvement fosters an environment where employees feel that it is their company.”
- “Leading by example.”
- “To show an inspiring vision of the organization’s future.”
- “SarTec management is very accessible and encourages communication with employees. As a result employee turnover rate is very low.”
- “Constant communication from top to bottom of organization.”

Question 6 (Sharing Leadership): In what ways do the owners of this company share leadership?

- “They put a lot of trust in their employees. They delegate tasks and trust that the tasks will be completed.”
- “Once an objective or goal is established the owners and employees tasked with completing the assignment share in the leadership role in order to bring the assignment to a successful conclusion.”
- “[By] developing a culture of collaboration rather than command and control where change is welcomed as an opportunity rather than a threat.”

Question 7: What additional thoughts would you like to share about your experience in this company and the owners?

- “SarTec has a great organization in terms of management and employee staff. Everyone seems to get along. Morale is high. Good place to work.”
- “They are generous people and great to work for.”
- “I think the numbers speak for themselves. Nobody ever leaves this company.”

Discussion

These findings revealed that there is great consistency between the owners’ and employees’ perspectives of the company. The employees’ responses combined with the interview data showed that the values verbalized by the owners are validated by the employees’ experience in the company. The responses of the employees confirm that servant leadership was being practiced by the owners and experienced by the employees. The responses also confirmed that the employees who responded to the survey were experiencing job satisfaction. This links, in the experience of these employees, employee job satisfaction with the servant leadership practices of the owners. This finding is consistent with previous studies linking servant leadership to job satisfaction (Hebert, 2004; Irving, 2004; Irving, 2005; Laub, 1999; Mayer, Bardes, & Piccolo, 2008). Furthermore, Rath and Conchie (2008) identified trust, compassion, stability, and hope to be the greatest needs of followers that, when adequately met, contribute to their job satisfaction. Participant response previously noted supports the presence of such servant leadership.

This study also revealed the possibility that the presence of valuing people is what drives the servant leadership of the company owners. This emphasis on valuing people had the most occurrences in the interview data and was also very well represented in the survey data. These findings indicate the possibility that the theme of valuing people serves as a baseline for the presence of the other servant leadership behaviors. On the importance of valuing people, Laub (2011) argues,

Healthy organizations have a different view of people. People are to be valued and developed, not used . . . Leaders accept the fact that people have present value not just future potential. People seem to have an innate ability to know whether or not they are being valued . . . whether or not they are trusted. Effective leaders accept a person’s value up front. They give them the gift of trust without requiring that they earn it first. As leaders work with people in organizations they will serve them by displaying the qualities of valuing people.

Based on such a perspective, it is not difficult to see why valuing people may have a disproportionately strong effect on the culture of a business or organization, and serve as the foundation on which other servant leadership behaviors may occur.

This study also found that the servant leadership behaviors of the owners were developed over time through family, experience, training, and religious faith. Larry’s servant leadership behavior emerged through his family of origin, his faith, and the negative experiences he had in a large company that seemed to devalue the importance of individuals. Marie’s servant leadership behaviors flowed from her family of origin, her faith, and her educational training and experience. Clayton’s servant leadership emerged from his relationship with his parents, especially their empowerment

of him in his developing years, his faith, and his own business experience.

Study Strengths and Limitations

This study provides significant support for other findings that have shown servant leadership is connected to employee satisfaction. The scope of this research was limited by the number of employees who responded to the survey. This also translates into exercising caution when generalizing the findings beyond the individual participants in the study. Because the primary researcher is related to some of the subjects of the research, there is a possibility of bias. This possibility was recognized by the researchers and was moderated by the inclusion of the online survey to gather data from the employees. In addition, the inclusion of a second researcher who has no relationship with the McNeff family also served to address the potential issue of researcher bias in the study. The anonymous nature of the survey allowed the employees to answer freely without fear of identification. The final question of the survey invited general responses from the employees.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study suggests the possibility that the *valuing people* is a baseline for the existence of the other servant leadership behaviors. In light of this, future studies examining the relationship of valuing people to other servant leadership behaviors are in order. In addition, the positive impact of servant leadership on job satisfaction was evidenced in a qualitative way in this study. Because of the extensive evidence of this positive correlation in the quantitative literature, it would be helpful to have additional qualitative studies providing rich description of this observation in a variety of organizational sectors. In addition, because the sample size in this qualitative study was limited, future studies that engage a larger number of participants would help with logical generalizations of the findings. Finally, family, faith, experience, and training all contributed to the servant leadership practice of the company owners with the family being the primary place in the lives of the owners where servant leadership was modeled, nurtured, and learned. This research invites future studies of the role of family relationships in the development of servant leaders.

Summary

This research project focused on servant leadership practice in a network of family-owned companies. Special attention was given to the connection between servant leadership practice and employee job satisfaction, and provided qualitative evidence of servant leadership's positive impact on employee job satisfaction. In addition, the priority of valuing people was observed to play a disproportionately significant role in the development of an overall servant-oriented culture. Thus,

we argue that the behavior of valuing people is a foundational servant leadership commitment that serves as a baseline for other servant leadership behaviors focused on the good of the led over the self-interest of the leader.

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