

Servant-Leadership during the COVID-19 Crisis: Implications for CTE

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Abstract

This article focusses on selected fundamental characteristics of servant-leadership (listening, empathy, healing, awareness, stewardship, persuasion, foresight), and their importance to CTE leaders and practitioners during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Challenges facing CTE during the COVID-19 crisis are addressed, as well as implications for policy and practice.

Keywords: career and technical education; COVID-19 pandemic; crisis; servant –leader; servant-leadership

Introduction

Today’s CTE leaders must invest in our students, teachers, and stakeholders so as to produce a pipeline with a robust workforce for our nation. According to Wilson (2017) “in today’s rapidly changing world, perhaps now more than ever we will need courageous and bold leadership in our workplaces, our communities and our schools to navigate the challenges of the 21st century” (p.6). Green and Wilson (2020) stated that:

While we do not yet know the long-term impact this pandemic will have on our nation, what we do know is that education, especially CTE, will be at the center of rebuilding our economy and the lives of Americans. (para. 5)

Empirical evidence based on 138 servant -leadership studies published from 2004 to 2019, revealed positive influence on the characteristics of servant-leadership that promote effective organizational change (Roberts, 2020). The primary purpose of this paper is to explore and discuss selected fundamental characteristics of servant- leadership that maybe applicable to CTE leaders and practitioners. A secondary purpose is to describe the challenges impacting CTE amid the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Servant-Leadership

The term ‘servant-leadership’ was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990) in ‘*The Servant as Leader*,’ an essay that Greenleaf published in 1970 (McCann et al, 2014). Greenleaf developed the theory of servant- leadership while he was working in the capacity as an executive at AT& T (Brewer, 2010; Greenleaf, 1970). There is also evidence of servant-leadership as a philosophy and practice in selected religious texts (Chinomona et al, 2013). Peter (2018) noted that “servant-leadership is a theory with strong altruistic and moral overtones that require leaders to be attentive to the needs of others and empathize with them” (p.337). Elliot (2017) reported that:

This kind of leadership ensures that the ones we are serving have their needs met before that of the leader, allowing the students to become invested in the work of the institution and the leader to become wiser, freer and more autonomous. (p.29)

Sipe and Frick (2015) argued that “a servant-leader is a *person of character* who puts people first. He or she is a *skilled communicator*, a *compassionate collaborator* who has *foresight*, is a *systems thinker*, and *leads with moral authority*” (p.4).

Selected Servant- Leadership Characteristics

As CTE organizational leaders face the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and other related disruptions in the workplace, the following fundamental characteristics of servant-leadership can provide ways to lead and adapt through a crisis.

1. *Listening*. Maxwell (2008, p.49) argues that the best leaders are listeners, and that leaders are more effective if they possess excellent listening skills. “Active mindful listening leverages several listening styles to ensure we are understanding the message being delivered. You must take time to prepare to listen and be 100 percent present” (Bramlett, 2018, p.59). “Listening coupled with periods of reflection, is essential to the growth and well-being of the servant - leader” (Spears, 2010, p.27). As an excellent reminder, always focus on listening when communicating with others.
2. *Empathy*. CTE leaders and practitioners can help navigate the crisis of COVID-19 by using empathy to help individuals in the workplace to heal. “Empathy is a vital competency of a servant-leader. You gain insights as to how an individual is subconsciously and emotionally reacting to an initiative or situation. Through empathy, you further support your relationship with the individual” (Bramlett, 2018, p.64). Spears (2010) noted that “the most successful servant leaders are those who have become skilled emphatic listeners” (p.27).
3. *Healing*. The potential for providing healing for one’s self and one’s relationship to others is considered as one of the greatest strengths of servant-leadership (Song, 2018; Spears, 2010). Also, healing is recognized as one of “the most needed characteristics of leaders today” (Ferch, 2012, p.xi). “The servant -leader is a force of transformation recognizing the human heart is fragile and life brings many tribulations into the work environment” (Brewer, 2010, p.5). CTE leaders and practitioners who are engaged in emotional healing may serve as support to the Millennial workforce facing selected health issues during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
4. *Awareness*. Both awareness and self-awareness are likely to strengthen today’s servant-leaders (Song, 2018; Spears, 2010). As 21st century CTE servant-leaders, “we must surround ourselves with individuals different from us to compensate for our weaknesses. Leverage diversity in others to form a more well-rounded team” (Bramlett, 2018, p.32). It is necessary for a servant-leader to gain awareness to fulfil his or her leadership duties.
5. *Stewardship*. Through stewardship, servant-leaders help constituents grow both personally and professionally. Stewardship is the sense of responsibility leaders have with regard to the use of power they possess. A servant-leader should lead by example, thus being the accountable person when your team or organization fail to perform at a specified standard (Bramlett, 2018; Chan, 2015-2017; Ebbrecht & Martin, 2015-2017; Spears, 2010). “It also emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion, rather than control” (Spears, 2010, p.29).

6. *Persuasion.* A bonafide servant -leader is more likely to use persuasion rather than authority (Chan, 2015-2017; Ebbrecht & Martin, 2015-2017; Paul et al, 2012; Song, 2018; Van Dierendonch, 2011). “Effective persuasion begins with knowing your team members and their internal motivation” (Bramlett, 2019, p.51).
7. *Foresight.* Researchers proclaimed that foresight involves using steps to mitigate issues that might arise in the future. A servant-leader should use past experiences and accurate information to plan for the future (Brewer, 2010; Chan, 2015-2017; Ebbrecht & Martin, 2015-2017; Paul et al, 2012; Song, 2018; Van Dierendonch, 2011).

Challenges Impacting CTE amid COVID-19 Pandemic

At the start of 2020, none of us could have predicted the challenging effects that COVID-19 pandemic was going to have on career and technical education. The major challenges impacting CTE due to the COVID-19 pandemic, are in the areas of work-based learning, industry recognized credentials, distance learning, and equity. (See Appendix A- COVID-19 preparedness questions).

Work-Based Learning Challenges

- Disengagement of industry partners.
 - Suspension of WBL programs by selected state and local CTE systems.
 - Delivery of WBL virtually or remotely.
 - Ensuring that virtual or remote WBL delivery does not increase inequities.
 - Access, equity, and diversity.
- (Robinson, 2020).

Industry Recognized Credentials Attainment Challenges

Estes (2020, para. 3) noted that industry-recognized credentials commonly require to satisfy one or a combination of the following:

- Contact hour requirements.
- Clinical practical experience.
- Assessments.

Thus, some of the current challenges are:

- Inability to complete industry recognized credentials in a timely manner.
 - Proctoring issues.
 - Limited or lack of access to testing facilities.
 - Concerns about remote delivery.
- (Estes, 2020).

Distance Learning Challenges

- Pedagogical challenges of how to deliver high quality CTE programs remotely (Flaherty, 2020; Hills, 2020; Ralph, 2020).
- Targeting of easily accessible resources for CTE learners and instructors.

- Lack of access to broad internet and selected devices for CTE students residing in rural and urban areas. This inequality access to broadband infrastructure is known as ‘*The homework gap*’ (Hills, 2020).

Equity Challenges

- How to leverage early warning systems to address equity gaps (Balfanz, 2020; McCain, 2020; Tucker, 2020).
- Disparities in remote learning among schools (Herold, 2020).
- Lack of technology access and support to ethnic minorities and individuals from low socio economic status (McCain, 2020).
- Mental health and food insecurity (McCain, 2020; PolyCentric, 2018).

Other Challenges

- Data collection and accountability.
- Supporting local districts implementing Perkins V.

Fundamental Steps for CTE Leaders and Stakeholders

1. *Culture of Trust.* Leading remote workers will require earning trust from the team (Doraiswamy, 2012).
2. *Embrace Servant-Leadership.* As a servant-leader, your greatest opportunity is what your teammates get accomplished; it is not about you! Thus, CTE leaders should focus on empowerment, involvement, and collaboration (Doeaiswamy, 2012; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).
3. *Gather Data.* Focus on metrics related to the pandemic (COVID-19). Data will guide you to make more and better informed decisions.
4. *Communication.* Field (2020) described communication in a crisis as a balancing act. “Communicate too much and you run the risk of people tuning you out; stay silent, and they may become worried and stressed” (Communicate section, para. 7). Arrange one-on-one meetings, team meetings, and selected project meetings as needed with all stakeholders.

Implications for Policy and Practice

According to Bramlett (2018) “servant leadership is a timeless concept describing individuals who lead by serving others and placing their needs above their own. The leader empowers individuals, focuses on growth and ensures that their basic needs are met” (p.115). CTE leaders and practitioners must understand the relevance and value of servant-leadership and place emphasis on applying what works best for them in their current work environment during the COVID-19 Pandemic and future crises.

Selected issues to address:

1. Investment in servant-leadership training. This training is necessary for increasing the pipeline of future CTE servant-leaders.
2. The value and relevance of providing leadership crisis workshops and seminars for CTE teachers and administrators (see Appendix B).
3. Identifying a task force that will have responsibility to develop and implement the education response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and future pandemics.

4. The COVID-19 Pandemic has increased the digital divide. Thus, CTE policymakers should address the importance of investing in access to digital infrastructure in rural and urban areas.
5. Professional development to support online training for CTE instructors.
6. The use of virtual Web-Based Learning (WBL) to mitigate access challenges for WBL placements (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2020).
7. The cost-benefit analysis in providing incentives to business and community partners to provide WBL experiences to secondary and postsecondary CTE students.
8. Design and implementation of high quality CTE virtual courses and simulated training for students and instructors.
9. Coordination and collaborative efforts with local public health authorities and CTE policymakers.
10. Development and maintenance of a website to communicate with teachers, students, and parents about available COVID 19 resources and related curriculum activities.

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Appendix A: Covid-19 Preparedness Questions of Interest for CTE Leaders and Practitioners

- What are the challenges you are facing in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What methods of distance learning are you using during the COVID-19 pandemic to deliver CTE content?
- What are your views for long-term inequities that will result from COVID-19 challenges?
- What leadership and instruction changes have you implemented in response to COVID-19? What challenges remain?

Appendix B

Crisis Leadership Survey

WITH 5 BEING VERY HIGH AND 1 BEING VERY LOW, RATE YOUR CRISIS LEADERSHIP TRAITS AND QUALITIES:

| | | | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I aggressively seek key information. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. | I effectively communicate information. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. | I am proactive and take initiative. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. | I think clearly under pressure. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5. | I can maintain calm and self-control. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. | I am flexible, versatile, and adaptable. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7. | I am positive, upbeat, and optimistic. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8. | I am creative and can improvise. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9. | I am resilient and mentally tough. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 10. | I act courageously and take risks. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 11. | I act in a decisive and timely manner. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 12. | I establish a clear vision and direction. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 13. | I am professionally competent. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 14. | I develop caring relationships. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 15. | I empower, equip, and enable employees. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

ADD UP YOUR SCORES FROM EACH OF THE QUESTIONS AND FIND WHERE YOU LAND BELOW:

65-75: LEADING THE WAY – Congratulations! You have the qualities necessary to lead successfully during crisis situations. Keep up the good work and continue to guide those you have the privilege to lead – through good times and bad.

64-51: ON THE RIGHT PATH – You have what it takes to lead through crisis, but you could strengthen some areas to be more effective. Note the areas where you scored 4 or lower and focus your attention on improving them.

51-38: READY FOR A MAP – While you have some strong leadership qualities, you still have plenty of room for improvement in order to successfully lead through a

crisis. Consider exploring our free resources on Communication and Crisis Leadership.

37 or less: UNPREPARED FOR THE JOURNEY – Dealing with crisis and disruption is the new norm for today’s leader. In order to stay competitive and grow, you must focus immediately on improving your crisis leadership capabilities -- start with the steps outlined in our article, **How to Lead Through a Crisis**.

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