The Applicability of the Ubuntu Philosophy to Building Organizational Communities and its impact on Organizational Performance

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Abstract:

The African philosophy of Ubuntu has been described as "the capacity…to express compassion… and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities" (Mabasa, 2020, p. 1). Previous research has termed it as being "the worldview of Black people of Africa from where they derive relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual knowledges, values and practices" (Mugumbate et al., 2023, pg. 3). Some scholars have proposed that the Ubuntu style of leadership is a close substitute to servant leadership (Asiimwe, 2023; Muller et al., 2019) stating that both concepts embody the importance of building communities in order to impact decision making (Meylahn et al., 2017). Previous studies have also concluded that there exist a lot of similarities between the two concepts when it comes to their strong correlation with the effectiveness of leaders. The difference is that servant leadership has primarily been viewed through western lens, particularly American, whilst Ubuntu has to date been viewed purely through an African lens, particularly South African. Some researchers have therefore stated that the differences in culture may affect the cross-fertilization of these two concepts (Asiimwe, 2023).

Problem Statement:

The Ubuntu Philosophy (hereon after referred to as Ubuntu) as both a theoretical concept and a methodological tool has received increased attention from academics and scholars in the recent past (Longweni et al., 2023). Research up till 2023 has extracted a combination of over six hundred peer-reviewed articles (Longweni et al., 2023; Mkosi et al, 2023). Many of these articles have been written from an empirical perspective like the writings of Metz (2007, 2010) and Miles (2017) whilst others have written about Ubuntu and its applicability in education (Mkosi et al, 2023), social work (Mabasa, 2020) and as a general leadership concept (Asiimwe, 2023; Laloo, 2022). Seehawer (2018) extolled the virtues of Ubuntu as a research methodology in itself where it was seen as a type of Participatory Action Research tool, working with people not as research subjects but instead striving to build relationships with them and treating them as colleague researchers (Seehawer, 2018). Ubuntu has been compared to servant leadership theory in general, both being grounded in relationality and the desire to work collectively to achieve common objectives (Meylahn & Musiyambiri, 2017; Muller et al., 2019). Having said this, there have been very minimal attempts to combine management and leadership theories deemed Western, with more indigenous ontologies (Mangaliso et al., 2022).The general problem is that very little research has been done on the applicability of Ubuntu from the perspective of the individual ten characteristics of servant leadership however. The specific problem is that no research has been done on the applicability of Ubuntu to the tenth characteristic of servant leadership which is building communities,

especially where it relates to building communities within organizations so as to improve organizational performance. This study will initiate research into the applicability of Ubuntu to building organizational communities in order to improve organizational performance.

Significance of Study:

Ubuntu as a philosophy highlights the connection between people and their community. It is underpinned by the saying, "I am because we are" (Chigangaidze et al., 2022). Ubuntu embodies the interconnections of all things and people within the community and building strong relationships is integral to this community spirit (Chigangaidze et al., 2022; Chisale, 2018; Meylahn & Musiyambiri, 2017). Previous research has highlighted the fact that building organizational communities, though not overtly named, has proven to positively impact organizational performance as a result of the positive connection between the spirit of solidarity and employee engagement (Muller et al., 2019).Existing literature however is scant on any possible impact that Ubuntu has on improving organizational performance especially as it has been so closely related to building organizational communities. The literature connecting Ubuntu and servant leadership that is available, looks at this connection through various lens like general leadership styles (Laloo, 2022) and educational theories (Makhanya et al., 2023).Academically, this research will contribute to scholarly literature by deepening the connection between Ubuntu and Servant Leadership through its tenth characteristic of building communities, especially as this relates to organizational performance.

Methodology:

The methodology used for this literature review encompassed mainly electronic searches of different databases. The limits of this research were restricted to peer-reviewed articles published between 2017 and 2023 except in cases were seminal work on specific foundational concepts needed to be referenced. Key terms used in the search were: Ubuntu Philosophy, Servant Leadership, Servant leadership and Ubuntu, Building Communities, Community Building, Ubuntu and Organizational Performance, Ubuntu Values.

Discussion:

The Ubuntu Philosophy:

While Western ethics are of an individualistic nature, African morality is rooted in the community (Chigangaidze et al., 2022; Metz & Gaie, 2010; Miles Sr, 2017). Mabasa (2020) succinctly states this notion. The Ubuntu philosophical framework and world view is often defined by its etymology of 'Ubu' meaning 'being' and 'ntu' meaning 'human' (Chigangaidze et al., 2022; Muller et al., 2019). The concept of Ubuntu emphasizes this relationship between people and their community and is grounded in the saying, "I am because of others"/ "I am because we are" (Chigangaidze et al., 2022; Metz & Gaie, 2010). Ontologically, it expresses

humanness in sharing among others and demonstrating compassion, sympathy and generous behavior (Chisale, 2018; Miles Sr, 2017; Phori & Nkoane, 2019; Tusasiirwe et al., 2021).The concept of Ubuntu has been found in all the regions of the African continent i.e., North, South, East, West and Central, although it is called by different names in different countries (Mabasa, 2020; Mugumbate et al., 2023; Tusasiirwe et al., 2021). It became popularized in South Africa leading to the global misunderstanding that it originated in South Africa. Some scholars state that this concept may have come from Egypt as far back as 1500BC (Mangena, 2016).

Scholars have argued that the five key values of Ubuntu are survival, solidarity spirit, compassion, respect and dignity (Nzimakwe, 2014; Seroto, 2016). No one of these values is more important than the other, instead, they complement each other to achieve that spirit of collectiveness and relationality (Seroto, 2016). The art of survival within Ubuntu lends itself to the thought that survival has occurred because one has leaned on others for support. This support garnered in a communal manner is closely linked to another key value of Ubuntu which is solidarity spirit where people learn to accomplish more when this is done collectively (Nzimakwe, 2014). Another key value is compassion which incidentally is closely similar to empathy, one of the ten characteristics of Servant Leadership. Compassion is the ability to understand the struggles of others and in the Ubuntu context, goes further to expect not only understanding but reaching out a helping hand to ameliorate those struggles. This value also highlights the interconnectedness of people (Seroto, 2016). In the context of Ubuntu, both respect and dignity are considered fundamental values in the way and manner in which people interact with each other and especially how they interact with those in authority.
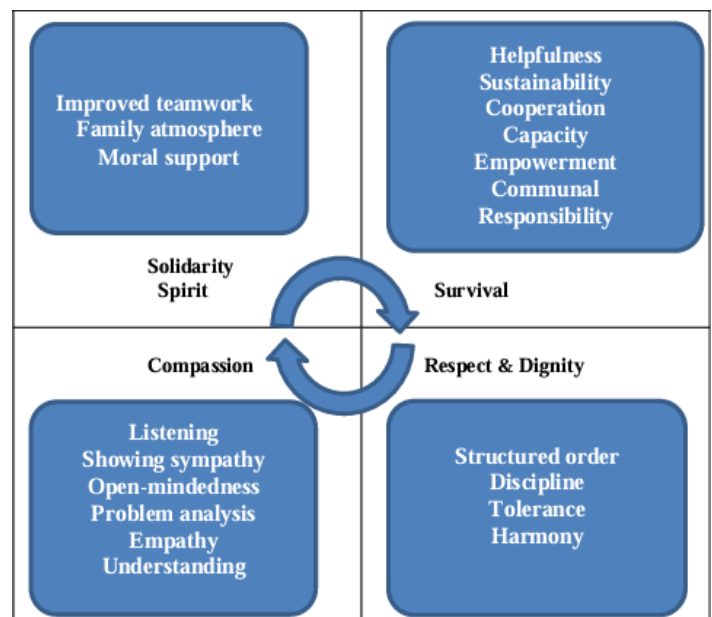
(**Source:** Seroto J 2016. Relating to others through *Ubuntu* values. In M Letseka (ed). *Open Distance Learning (ODL) through the philosophy of Ubuntu*. New York, NY: Nova Science)

Servant Leadership Theory:

A fundamental component of the Servant leadership theory developed by Greenleaf is that the leader's primary responsibility is to make sure that the needs of their followers are secured (Spears, 2004; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). This thus lays more emphasis on the importance of the follower over that of the leader (Sims et al., 2021). There has been an increase in scandals within organizations, primarily due to the immoral practices of their leaders in the recent past (Adero & Odiyo, 2020; Tanno & Banner, 2018) and this has fueled the cry for more ethical forms of leadership within organizations, guided by principles which prioritize the nurturing of human capital (Horsman, 2018). The call for the utilization of servant leadership practices being one of them (Stauffer & Maxwell, 2020) especially as servant leaders are also viewed as change agents (Tanno & Banner, 2018; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015).

Spears (2004) developed what has come to be known as the ten characteristics of servant leadership after being a scholar of Greenleaf for many years. These ten characteristics are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people and building communities (Blanchard, 2018; Spears, 2004).

Building Communities as the Tenth Characteristic of Servant Leadership in an Organizational Setting and its impact on Organizational Performance:

A thorough examination of the literature has shown that there is no one single definition of the building communities characteristic, especially when it comes to community building in an organizational setting. For the purposes of this study, the following definition developed by Creighton-Randall (2024) will therefore be used. Building organizational communities refers to the servant leader caring enough about their employees and followers to ensure that they work collectively and collaboratively whilst engendering a sense of belonging in order to achieve the organizations objectives and achieve personal growth and development. 21st Century employees face various challenges within the organizational setting and these can be overcome when leaders build relationships and ensure that all in their teams are working towards the same outcomes (Hoch et al., 2018) and are making connections with their followers. Communities also need to be built amongst the employees themselves (Mckeage et al., 2020). Leaders and employees therefore need to support each other in a caring manner as they work together and the environment created by the servant leader needs to enable this (Ragnarsson et al.,2018) thus establishing the concept of building organizational communities.

Although not overtly named, the building communities characteristic of servant leadership has been seen to have a positive impact on organizational performance according to previous studies (Qiu & Dooley, 2018). The Spirit of solidarity as highlighted by Muller (2019), is when people can identify with like minds within a community or in an organizational setting, within an organization. This research determines that there is a positive correlation between employee engagement and this spirit of solidarity (Muller et al., 2019). Interestingly enough, solidarity spirit is also a key value of Ubuntu. Other studies have stated that in order to increase production and meet profit targets, the promotion of cordial relationships amongst employees should be integral to their business models. This is especially so when this is based on the employees having a shared identity when it comes to organizational performance (Woermann & Engelbrecht, 2019). Yet other scholars stress that having employees help each other to meet both their individual and organizational objectives leads to a more effective work performance (Purwani et al., 2020).Past research has demonstrated that, like the servant leadership theory itself, the building of organizational communities is not a short-term process and it necessitates ethical and moral resolve if one is to achieve long term success (Haass et al., 2023).

Connecting Ubuntu and Servant Leadership:

As mentioned previously, a number of scholars have determined that the Ubuntu way of leading is a close substitute to the servant leadership way of leading, especially when looking at the tenth characteristic of servant leadership which is building communities (Meylahn & Musiyambiri, 2019; Qiu & Dooley, 2018; Woermann & Engelbrrecht, 2019). Previous research has referred to both servant leadership and Ubuntu as relational theories (Mangena, 2016). Both theories are known to symbolize the interconnections between people and things in their communities and the cultivation and maintenance of these strong relationships are integral to this community spirit (Chigangaidze et al., 2022; Chisale, 2018; Metz & Gaie, 2010; Miles Sr, 2017). Past research has also stressed that being in community intertwines the feeling of solidarity with others people with a feeling of identification. This elicits inspiration for the mutual good and well-being (Metz & Gaie, 2010). As with those who choose to practice servant leadership, those who lead with Ubuntu are also said to put the needs of the community in the center of everything they do (Metz, 2007). They are also very intentional about the actions they take to achieve this (Miles, 2017).

Some Criticisms and Challenges of Ubuntu and Servant Leadership:

Ubuntu:

Ubuntu has been given a patriarchal connotation by some, particularly as patriarchy is still very prevalent in the African context (Chisale, 2018; Miles, 2017). Other research has stated that Ubuntu allows men to be dominant over women (Chisale, 2018). The argument that Ubuntu should be looked at through a female lens has therefore been put forth. This argument states that elements which are fundamental to Ubuntu, like care and concern, should be valid for both men and women (Creighton-Randall, O, 2023).Another challenge to the study of Ubuntu is that some

scholars choose to present Ubuntu as a singular concept instead of recognizing the fact that it has many localized connotations depending on the various communities in Africa through whose lens it could be discussed (Tusasiirwe et al., 2021).

Servant Leadership

Like in the case of Ubuntu, some scholars believe that servant leadership supports patriarchal models, thus ignoring the contributions that women have made to servant leadership theory (Camm, 2019). Other scholars have highlighted the fact that the word "servant" acts as a trigger to some African-Americans, bringing forth visions of the slavery era and its attendant ills, in the United States (Graham, 2018; Tran, 2022; Sims et al., 2021). Past research recognizes that both during and after slavery, servant leaders flourished in the black churches (Bunch, 2013).Not enough attention has been paid to this however and servant leadership has been showcased mainly through a Western male lens (Reynolds, 2011).A key challenge from an organizational point of due is the amount of time that needs to be devoted to building the relationships between the servant leader and his or her followers or employees. This can have a negative impact on organizational performance in the short-term whilst these relationships are being built (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021).In spite of these criticisms however, research has determined that in the longer term, concepts like Ubuntu and servant leadership are transformational approaches for the individual leader and for the wider community (Meylahn & Musiyambiri, 2017) and that both styles of leadership have a positive impact on organizational performance (Asiimwe, 2023). At the heart of the concepts of Ubuntu and servant leadership lies community building as both endeavor to provide service to the communities within which they find themselves, whether organizationally or otherwise (Meylahn & Musiyambiri, 2017; Miles Sr, 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations:

In conducting this review, the literature reveals that an insignificant amount of research has been carried out on the applicability of Ubuntu being utilized to support the building of organizational communities, which is an important characteristic of Servant leadership, and in turn, contributing to improved organizational performance. This is in spite of the fact that Ubuntu as an African philosophy has been shown to have very close ties to servant leadership (Woermann & Engelbrecht, 2019) and that the literature revealed that the concept of building communities is fundamental to this philosophy of Ubuntu, both having relationality at their core. Ubuntu has been utilized in educational settings (Mkosi, et al, 2023), as an Afrocentric leadership style (Laloo, 2022) and in the area of social work (Makhanya, 2023). Scholars have also expressed the fact that more work needs to be done on the utilization of Ubuntu in a business setting (Longweni, 2023) and this paper is an attempt to pursue this when it comes to the impact of Ubuntu on organizational performance in an organizational setting.

Recommendations:

An overarching recommendation would be to enable an environment where leaders and employers are open to experiencing different leadership concepts from around the world. Once this environment exists, a taskforce can be established to look at these different concepts and adapt them to suit their particular workplace, all in a bid to improve organizational performance. This process itself should have Ubuntu at its core, the belief that everyone in the community, in this case, the workplace, are valued members and should be treated as such. This recommendation can be implemented by first of all introducing training seminars for all leaders to understand the concepts of Ubuntu and servant leadership, particularly the tenth characteristic of building communities. This training of trainers can then be cascaded down to the rest of the employees before a taskforce is set up to delve deeper into these concepts and recommend ways that they can be implemented within the organization.

Servant Leadership in General:

- Organizational leaders should be urged to utilize a servant leadership approach specifically geared towards the welfare and growth of their employees who are essentially their followers. In order to do this, training that develops servant leadership skills amongst leaders, especially in the area of building communities in the organization should be implemented.

Building Organizational Communities:

- A definition of building organizational communities as developed by this author has been utilized in this paper. Work can progress on creating a universally acceptable definition of building organizational communities, especially within the context of servant leadership and how this can improve organizational performance. This endeavor should include collaborating with academic researchers and practitioners in the relevant fields.

Ubuntu Philosophy:

- The task force mentioned above should take a significant amount of time researching the philosophy of Ubuntu in order to come up with recommendations on how this philosophy can be applicable to their specific organization.
- Ideally, the key values of Ubuntu, Survival, Solidarity Spirit, Compassion, Respect and Dignity need to be encompassed as part of the ethos of the organization and need to be shown how to be practicalized in a work environment.

Managerial behavioral changes and organizational phases to be utilized to actualize these recommendations would include: Managerial Behaviors:

- **Demonstrate Active Listening:**

  o Actively listen to employees' concerns, ideas, and feedback. This aligns with the servant leadership characteristic of listening and feeds into the Ubuntu value of compassion.

- **Show Empathy:**

  o Demonstrate empathy towards employees, understanding their challenges, and supporting their personal and professional development. Empathy in itself is a characteristic of servant leadership and also feeds into the Ubuntu value of solidarity spirit.

Organizational Steps:
- **Encourage Collaborative Projects:**

o Cross-functional collaboration and team-building initiatives should be promoted to strengthen the sense of community within the organization thus bringing in both the building communities characteristic and Ubuntu values to the fore of everything the organization sets out to do.

- **Measure Organizational Performance:**

o Develop metrics to assess organizational performance linked to the overlap of the building communities characteristic and Ubuntu. This may involve qualitative assessments, employee engagement surveys, and key performance indicators.

In order to find out whether the above measures are making an impact on organizational performance, mechanisms to provide feedback should also be implemented. Regular feedback mechanisms such as surveys or open forums should be instituted to gauge employee satisfaction and identify further areas for improvement.

Future Research:

Future research should continue to explore the applicability of Ubuntu and other characteristics of servant leadership like empathy and stewardship, on organizational performance. From a scholar's point of view, future research should also test the applicability of Ubuntu and servant leadership in other types of organizations, like within government agencies.

Summary:

This article initially establishes what the Ubuntu Philosophy embodies and also showcases the fact that both Ubuntu and Servant leadership are closely related, especially when it comes to the tenth characteristic of servant leadership which is building communities. The article does however point out that previously, Ubuntu was viewed primarily through an Afrocentric lens while servant leadership is viewed primarily through a western lens. The article continues with a review of the literature on Ubuntu, Servant Leadership in general, Building Communities and its impact on organizational performance and the connection between Ubuntu and Servant Leadership. Some criticism and challenges of both Ubuntu and servant leadership were explored but overall, the research showed that in the long term, concepts like Ubuntu and servant leadership are approaches that transform both the individual leader and the community in which they serve and that both have a positive impact on organizational performance. Fundamentally, both Ubuntu and servant leadership are about community values and the onus is on organizations to work on cross-fertilizing these two concepts in order to improve organizational performance both for the individuals who work in these organizations and ultimately for the organization as a whole. The article ends by proposing areas for future research.

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