

‘In my pursuit of servant leadership, I had unwittingly sacrificed my own needs’

Pull quote: “I realised not all leadership styles resonated with the core values I held”

Prior to embarking on my career in academia, I began my nursing career as a general practice nurse. During this period, I encountered a multitude of leadership styles. Each left an imprint on not only my professional identity but also my understanding of leadership in the context of its balance between compassion and efficiency.

As I started on my journey, I sought to emulate the behaviour of those occupying leadership positions. However, as the realities of the environment began to unfold before me, I gradually realised that not all leadership styles resonated with the core values I held. In my naivety, I mistakenly believed that effective leadership necessitated reflecting the actions of my superiors, even when such actions clashed with my internal beliefs.

During my role I encountered many different leadership styles – some positive, some not so – but each interaction, good or bad, I now consider a learning experience. I observed leaders whose approach contrasted with the principles I cherished, characterised by a lack of empathy and genuineness that sparked detachment rather than camaraderie. Research indicates that leadership styles incongruent with personal values can lead to decreased job satisfaction and increased stress among employees (Sfantou et al., 2017). It was in observing these shortcomings that I felt obliged to create my own path, guided by the principles of servant leadership. This is a leadership style that focuses on the priority of the well-being and development of team members. Servant leadership is rooted in the philosophy of prioritising others' needs and fostering a supportive community, as articulated by Greenleaf (1977).

I commenced my journey into servant leadership, a philosophy that resonated deeply with my intrinsic values. I tried to embody the virtues of humility and empathy in my interactions with colleagues, striving to be a person of support and guidance. My commitment to constant visibility and availability became the hallmark of my leadership style, reflecting my unwavering desire to serve others.

Initially, the journey appeared promising. Colleagues responded positively to my approachability and willingness to help. However, as time continued cracks appeared. Demands of role, coupled with the emotional burden of others' struggles, took a toll on my well-being. Despite my best intentions, I had neglected to prioritise my self-care. Studies have shown that nurses practicing servant leadership are at risk of emotional exhaustion if self-care is neglected (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). In my pursuit of servant leadership, I had unwittingly sacrificed my own needs.

It was at this point that I was forced to confront the fact that true servant leadership begins with self-compassion. The significance of self-care in preventing burnout among servant leaders is well-documented (Neff, 2003). With a heavy heart, I decided to resign; I knew this was essential for reclaiming my sense of balance and purpose.

In hindsight, this decision proved to be a catalyst for personal development and insight. I emerged with a new understanding of the balance between serving others and own needs; this realisation reshaped my perspective on leadership and strength. This experience reflects broader implications

for the nursing workforce, where servant leadership, while beneficial, must be balanced with self-care to prevent burnout and ensure sustainable practice.

Research into the prevalence and impact of servant leadership within the NHS suggests that while this style can enhance team performance and job satisfaction, it is not without its challenges (West et al., 2015). The emotional demands placed on leaders can lead to significant personal strain if not managed properly. The challenge for the wider workforce is to adopt leadership styles that align with personal values while also implementing strategies for self-care and resilience.

Embarking on a new chapter in my career, I rely on the invaluable lessons I gained from my experiences. By sharing my journey, I hope to highlight the importance of aligning leadership styles with personal values and the critical need for self-care in maintaining effective and sustainable leadership.

Sarah Butler, Lecturer, University of Hull

References

Barbuto, J. E., & Wheeler, D. W. (2006). Scale development and construct clarification of servant leadership. *Group & Organization Management*, 31(3), 300-326.

Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Paulist Press.

Neff, K. D. (2003). The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2(3), 223-250.

Sfantou, D. F., Laliotis, A., Patelarou, A. E., Sifaki-Pistolla, D., Matalliotakis, M., & Patelarou, E. (2017). Importance of leadership style towards quality of care measures in healthcare settings: A systematic review. *Healthcare*, 5(4), 73.

West, M., Eckert, R., Collins, B., & Chowla, R. (2015). *Caring to Change: How compassionate leadership can stimulate innovation in health care*. The King's Fund.