Serving the Once and Future King: Using the TV Series *Merlin* to Teach Servant-Leadership and Leadership Ethics in Schools

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Abstract

The recent financial crisis has brought business ethics issues to the forefront. While most colleges have formal training in business ethics, a person's ethical standards have often developed before college age. This application brief proposes using digital popular media to teach servant-leadership principles to public school adolescents. The purpose is to illustrate the advantage of using secular content from the television series *Merlin* (Wilkie, 2008) to demonstrate an ethics-based leadership perspective through a medium that is accessible to the virtual/video generation.

Introduction

Greenleaf (2003) noted "the work of leadership education today takes place in a world that is increasingly glutted with information and yet starved for wisdom" (p. 13). Since Robert Greenleaf first coined the phrase servant-leadership in his 1970 essay the concept has been widely embraced by Christian and educational communities. With the growing apprehension in the United States of America about separation of church and state, teaching a leadership style articulated by a devoutly Christian man in public schools can create concern. Yet, the need for

developing ethical principles in future leaders is obvious considering the current economic predicament. Although an individual's ethical standards have often developed before college age (Bisland, Karnes, & Cobb, 2004), few school districts have curriculum including leadership or ethics for mainstream high school students (Williams, Yanchar, Jensen, & Lewis, 2003). Responsibility for developing ethical standards in young people falls on their immediate family and friends (Bisland, et al., 2004). As such, there is a need in public schools for leadership training that is grounded in ethical principles and free of alliance to a specific faith. There is also a need to make use of media that is appealing to the "video generation" (Smilanich & Lafreniere, 2010, pp. 604-605)

Utilizing film and popular media to teach leadership as a vehicle for social change can make learning more accessible to the Millennials (Hickam & Meixner, 2008) while remaining religiously neutral. Film is also a powerful tool for teaching complex leadership concepts through the experience of visually witnessing leadership scenarios and analyzing behavior as observers (Enlow & Popa, 2008; McMahon & Bramhall, 2004). Digital media offer an endless supply of examples for analysis from a leadership perspective (Cummins, 2007). Prosperio and Gioia indicate it is appealing to the technically savvy "virtual generation" (cited in Gifford, 2010, p. 165). Through the use of film facilitators can create a safe and effective learning environment (Cummins, 2007). Students can relate to scenarios as they come alive through fictional and historical characters (Callahan & Rosser, 2007).

This application brief proposes using the story of Merlin and the young King Arthur in the BBC television series *Merlin* (Wilkie, 2008) to teach adolescents ages 14 to18 basic servant-leadership principles. We use the episode *The Moment of Truth* (Vanstone & Moore, 2008) to illustrate ethical leadership in practice. The popular Arthurian characters demonstrate the 10 characteristics of servant-leadership identified by Spears (2004) including stewardship, empathy, foresight, persuasion, conceptualization, commitment to the growth of people, listening, awareness, building community, and healing. Recommendations are made for classroom activities that are appropriate for the learning styles of Millenials as outlined by Wisniewski (2010).

Servant-Leadership, Spirituality, and Ethics

According to Spears (1995), servant-leadership was conceived by Robert Greenleaf in the 1960s when he read Hesse's 1956 book, *The Journey to the East*, which is an account of a mythical journey by a group of men on a spiritual quest. Through his experience in shaping large institutions Greenleaf saw the need for

leaders to exercise humility, morality, and social justice (Spears, 1995). By developing managers who mentor their employees instead of promoting themselves, Greenleaf believed businesses could create both successful companies and positive work environments. Spears (2004) observation of recurrent themes in Greenleaf's writing led him to identify the 10 characteristics of servant-leadership. In practice these characteristics are illustrative of how leadership applies ethics in decision-making and relating to others.

Teaching servant-leadership in schools and workplaces poses a challenge due to Greenleaf's numerous references to Christian texts (see Hamilton & Bean, 2005). Lee and Zemke (1995) noted despite a noticeable trend in the acceptance of spirituality in the workplace, crossing the "fuzzy lines" (p. 107) between work and spirituality is not always well received. Crossing the line of secularism in public schools is equally, if not more controversial. Therefore, tools for teaching servant-leadership in public schools must be developed free of religious affiliation while still allowing for ethical considerations.

Ethical dimensions of leadership—social justice, putting others' needs and the greater good before profit, investing in the community and the future—appear to be diminishing in the business world. Many business people dismiss the idea of servant-leadership because its principles do not correspond to the more typically recognized leader traits of assertiveness and a self-centered desire for power and influence (Spears, 1995). Traditional forms of leadership have led to the "moral decline of the relational environment" (Ferch, 2004, p. 227) in our business world.

As more scandal and corruption is uncovered, the need for teaching ethics and leadership to our youth becomes clearer (Enlow & Popa, 2008; Spears, 2004). Servant-leadership as a philosophy of leadership (Prosser, 2010) places particular emphasis on ethical considerations of social justice and human dignity (Ferch, 2004). Greenleaf's original intent was to describe an organizational leadership style and philosophy for corporate adults. Yet, its adaptability to youth leadership training is obvious (Grothaus, 2004). Wisniewski (2010) noted the purpose of a leadership education model is to "help learners identify their core values and beliefs and examine the relationships between their espoused values and their actions" (p. 66). By instilling young people with servant-leadership principles before they have management positions, corporations could transform into an environment dedicated to social justice and stewardship for a sustainable future.

Servants and Leaders – Merlin and Arthur – in *The Moment of Truth* Episode

In the following we present a plot summary of the episode *The Moment of Truth* (Vanstone & Moore, 2008) from the first season of the BBC television series *Merlin* (Wilkie, 2008) and examples of basic servant-leadership principles enacted by the characters. There are numerous advantages of utilizing this particular medium. For example, Arthur and Merlin are historically recognizable characters, the story is free of religious undertones, and the episodes offer a story structure that is divided into easily digestible chunks of time. The first season of *Merlin* is available for download at the iTunes shop or on DVD.

The episode *The Moment of Truth* (Vanstone & Moore, 2008) relies on the human elements of friendship, loyalty, and family, along with fantasy and magic to reveal its lessons. King Uther, Arthur's father, has outlawed magic in the kingdom. This decree makes Merlin's position particularly precarious. If he is discovered to have magical abilities, it will cost him his life.

Plot Summary and Examples of Servant-Leadership

The episode opens with a small village being forced to turn over their food to a man named Kanen from a stronger neighboring village. The scene shifts to the open air market of Camelot, where Merlin discovers his mother. Her black eye is evidence that the village Merlin left behind is in danger. Merlin takes her to King Uther for help; however, previous treaties make it impossible to send troops from Camelot to the village's aid. Merlin, Morgana, and Gwen decide to go themselves recognizing their talents that could be useful. By taking this action, they practice the servant-leadership characteristic *stewardship*. It is the job of a leader to advance the common good and envision long term benefits (Greenleaf, 2003).

Arthur demonstrates the servant-leadership characteristic of *empathy* when he comes to support Merlin. Though Merlin is a mere servant the prince sees him as a human being in need and chooses to help. Servant-leaders recognize that people are valuable no matter their status (Ferch, 2004). Morgana and Gwen risk their lives to help Merlin and his mother, demonstrating that leadership can come in all shapes, sizes, and rank.

When the traveling party reaches the village they find Kanen already there, attempting to steal the little remaining rations. Arthur intervenes and Kanen decides the small group he has with him are not a match for his new adversaries. He retreats with the promise to return ready to deal with Arthur.

Immediately Arthur gathers the people together to begin training for the next attack. He demonstrates the principle of *foresight*. Foresight enables a leader to understand lessons from the past and present as well as the future's likely consequences (Spears, 2004). One villager, Will, says to give Kanen what he wants. Arthur replies "And then what? Those of you who don't starve together face him again next harvest? And the harvest after that?" (Vanstone & Moore, 2008). Arthur shows an ability to look into the future and see what must be done now to save the village later—again exemplifying *foresight* and *stewardship*.

When Will runs off after his confrontation with Arthur, Merlin follows him and demonstrates *persuasion*. Merlin appeals to Will as a person and recognizes that Will's past may play a large role in how he feels about Arthur. While Will refuses to change his negative view of Arthur, Merlin does not force his own perspective on his friend. Servant-leaders rely on persuasion, not force, to make and implement decisions. Patience is a critical quality in using persuasion; it requires being open to resistance and willing to wait for others to consider and become comfortable with an idea (Silberman & Hansburg, 2005), even if it means delaying a decision.

Arthur chooses to accept the challenge to arm and train the villagers, which requires the ability to *conceptualize*. Arthur's organization of the villagers for training shows his ability to work with minimal resources. Servant-leaders think creatively beyond immediate realities and see future possibilities (Spears, 1995).

Arthur shows his commitment to the *growth of people* when he assigns a weaker villager, Matthew, an important task. He wants Matthew to feel helpful in providing a valuable service to his village. Servant-leaders are committed to seeing others grow and "become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous" (Greenleaf, 2003, p. 41). They often must put aside their own ambitions so that others can succeed, recognizing that the team's empowerment is more important than their own (Grothaus, 2004).

Arthur also demonstrates *listening* in his conversations with Gwen and Morgana. When the women first approach him about allowing the female villagers to fight he denies them. As he becomes more aware of the lack of capable fighters and effective weapons, he chooses to listen to the women again. Before making decisions servant-leaders listen to and consider the opinions of those being served. When leaders are most anxious to progress they must be willing to listen to the arguments of those who do not share their view (Silberman & Hansburg, 2005).

In these same conversations Arthur displays *awareness*. By being aware of the circumstances Arthur has a more complete picture of the situation, which enables

him to make sound decisions. Awareness of both oneself and one's surroundings helps a servant-leader understand ethical issues from multiple perspectives (Spears, 1995).

When Arthur helps Merlin put on his armor, instead of the usual habit of Merlin helping the prince, Arthur demonstrates how serving is important to leading. In Arthur's time the knight supported and taught the squire, while the squire cared for the knight's armor, dressed him, and fought beside him (Perkins, 2003). Serving is a chance to *build community* (Spears, 2004). Arthur shows Merlin the respect of an equal, thus demonstrating that Merlin is far more valuable than just his contributions as a servant.

In the end, Will demonstrates the final principle of *healing*. Although he does not understand Merlin's affection for Arthur, Will uses his dying breaths to protect Merlin's secret. Servant-leaders seek opportunities to heal wounds through encouragement, support, and forgiveness (Ferch, 2004). Will heals what could have become a horrid rift in the relationship between Merlin and Arthur by sacrificing his own reputation. Will knows that if Merlin trusts Arthur, Will must trust Arthur as well.

Although Arthur exercises servant-leadership with a certain degree of wisdom and skill, it is clear that Arthur is young and still learning. King Arthur's legend and legacy is evidence of his exceptional leadership (Perkins, 2003) and of how young leaders can have an impact that reaches far beyond their generation.

Recommendations

Viewing can be guided using a handout of servant-leadership principles to (a) help ensure that students are consciously observant, (b) provide input for in-depth discussion, and (c) facilitate proper processing of the concepts presented (Graham, Sincoff, Baker, & Ackermann, 2003; McMahon & Bramhill, 2004).

Handout for Viewing		
Servant-Leadership Principles	Character	Scenario
Listening		
Empathy		
Healing		
Awareness		
Persuasion		
Conceptualization		
Foresight		
Stewardship		
Commitment to the Growth of People		
Building Community		

Servant-leadership is a complex topic that requires years to truly begin to practice and grasp fully. The moderator's task is to provide the foundation for understanding while acknowledging that these basic principles are an introduction to servant-leadership (Callahan & Rosser, 2007). Viewing and discussing the clips alone will not provide the knowledge and skills needed. Educators should seek opportunities to guide students' application of servant-leadership principles in ways that engage critical thinking, allow students to develop personal concepts of leadership, that are experiential and meaningful for their daily lives as well as directly in the classroom (Wisniewski, 2010).

Facilitators can consider additional questions and activities that tie the film's events to students' interests and everyday lives (Wisniewski, 2010). Students should connect their learning to personal experiences or familiar scenes from

other films to improve retention (Torock, 2008). In this way the students can learn from each others' stories, relate characters' behavior to real-life situations, discuss alternate behaviors, and consider whether they might be willing to exercise similar behavior (McMahon & Bramhill, 2004).

Guiding Questions

Consider the servant-leadership principles introduced through *Merlin*:

Stewardship Empathy Foresight Persuasion Conceptualization
Commitment to the growth of people   Listening   Awareness
Building community   Healing

1.   Have you seen people in the news who demonstrate these principles?
2.   Do you know anyone personally who leads this way?
3.   Do you have any situations in your life that you are leading this way or you could
       try applying servant-leadership principles? What outcome would you expect based
       on your application of these principles?

Suggested Activities

1.   Create role-play scenarios for groups of four. Two students play leaders; two
       students play followers. One leader is assigned the task of practicing a specified
       servant-leadership principle such as listening. The other leader is assigned the task
       to do the opposite of the corresponding servant-leadership principle – such as
       imposing the leader's own ideas on the follower. The followers are instructed to go
       to the leader with a request. The scenes are played out in leader/follower pairs.
       Students discuss how they felt in their positions and the impact of servant-
       leadership on outcomes.

2.   Students are assigned the task to be mindful of servant-leadership behaviors
       exercised by people in their environment. Students are asked to participate in
       creating a class blog by contributing posts describing specific incidents in which
       they felt they observed someone applying servant-leadership principles, the
       outcomes (if they observed any), and their thoughts about how that person's
       behavior affected others and themselves.

We have illustrated only some examples of servant-leadership principles in one episode of *Merlin* (Wilkie, 2008). Other or additional episodes can also be used and students' discussion may generate further examples. Although we limit our discussion of servant-leadership to teaching ethical principles of leadership, we recognize that servant-leadership can be used much more broadly. For example, servant-leadership can be applied to teaching civil rights, human rights, global citizenship, and in service-learning programs.

Conclusion

This application brief demonstrates how secular media can be used to teach basic principles of servant-leadership and leadership ethics. The episode *The Moment of Truth* (Vanstone & Moore, 2008) from the television series *Merlin* (Wilkie, 2008) presents a model for analysis that is appropriate for use in public schools. Students can transport the characters' actions into present day issues, reflect and discuss ethical concerns, and relate servant-leadership principles to their own experiences. As today's youth become tomorrow's leaders, exercises like those described here can help them attain the skills and knowledge for creating a new, sustainable, and socially just leadership legacy.

According to Perkins (2003), "Most kings aren't remembered for much at all, and others are remembered for awful slaughter, lawful robbery or laughable incompetence. King Arthur… is remembered positively for the kind of king he was, for, in fact, the way he led" (p. 91).

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Laura M. Oliver developed a passion for Servant Leadership while earning her undergraduate degree from Southern Wesleyan University. Her continued desire to study leadership and its many facets drove Laura to pursue a Master's Degree in Organizational Leadership from Gonzaga University, which she completed in December 2009. Laura has previous experience as a corporate trainer specializing in leadership, human resources, and computer skills. She currently divides her work time between managing administrative staff for a nation-wide construction company and teaching voice to the next generation. Laura also publishes a blog about frugal living, www.afrugalchick.com, which involves regular work with local television and radio stations.

Kae Reynolds is a doctoral candidate, teaching, and graduate assistant in Leadership Studies at Gonzaga University. Kae earned a Master of Organizational Leadership at Saint Ambrose University. Upon completing her bachelor's degree in Russian, she received certification in Secondary Education. She has experience teaching foreign languages and English as a Foreign Language to grades 7-12, as well as EFL to college students and adult learners. Kae currently mentors online students earning their Master's Degree in Organizational Leadership in completing their capstone papers and portfolios. Before beginning her doctoral studies, she worked as an expatriate in Germany in the field of information technology, marketing, and organizational communication where she managed large-scale international online projects. Kae recently received the Greenleaf Scholars Award from the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership to conduct the research for her dissertation which will explore correlations between constructs of the ethic of care as a perspective of feminist morality and servant-leadership dimensions using survey design.