



Glimpses of Servant Leadership in Mauritius: A Bold and Effective Response to COVID-19

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Introduction

As soon as the WHO characterized COVID-19 as a global pandemic (WHO, 2020), continents have braced themselves in different ways to face this unprecedented and unexpected challenge. Consequently, responses have been varied both within and across continents. Some countries responded to the COVID-19 outbreak with draconian, mandatory social distancing policies whilst others have reacted more timidly, either by deliberate choice or due to implementation constraints, leaving individuals to choose for themselves an appropriate degree of self-isolation. Others have still opted for a relatively permissive approach based on institutional and cultural underpinnings.

China implemented extraordinary public health measures at great socioeconomic cost, moving swiftly and decisively to ensure early identification of cases, prompt laboratory testing, facility-based isolation of all cases, contact tracing, and quarantine. In the community, mobility was at a near standstill, with social distancing implemented at a grand scale. China's massive transmission rates called for extreme measures, and the measures were successful. Remarkably, South Korea lost control and regained it with no lockdown and simply strong application of the above principles, enhanced by using novel digital technologies for contact tracing (Fisher et al., 2020). Kerala was the first Indian state to

encounter the virus and had kept deaths down to three initially. It had largely curbed COVID-19 but later on was dealing with nearly 200 cases, all people arriving from other parts of India. Senegal from the African continent seemed to be quite innovative in its approach, having devised a cheap test for the virus and using 3-D printing to produce ventilators at a fraction of the going price. China, South Korea, India and Senegal had one common feature and that is, preceding experience in dealing with corona viruses and other viral outbreaks.

The Republic of Mauritius, located off the southeast coast of Africa, shining as a democracy with roughly 1.3 million inhabitants on its three main islands: Mauritius, Rodrigues, and Agalega, with no prior experience in dealing with any outbreak of such declared magnitude and cost, had a unique response to the COVID-19 test.

To a parliamentary question addressed to the Honourable Prime Minister, Pravind Kumar Jugnauth, Minister of Defence, Home Affairs and External Communications, Minister for Rodrigues, Outer Islands and Territorial Integrity in regard to the opening of the Republic's borders amid the COVID-19 Pandemic, stating which actions will be taken to ensure the safety of the population against a second wave of COVID-19, he replied as follows:

“The World Health Organisation had estimated that Mauritius had the highest risk of exposure in Africa, and would have the second highest rate of infections in a report dated 11 March 2020 amidst the new pandemic:

Number of mild infections: 87424

Number of severe infections: more than 1000

Hospital admissions: more than 22000

Deaths: 837” (pq 21July, 2020).

The projection from the WHO seemed to cast apprehensions on the majority of Mauritians as to whether the government would be able to handle the looming crisis. Not only did the island have extensive links with hotspots in Europe and Asia – tourism being the foundation of its economy – but also the tenth most densely

populated country in the world. These were fertile conditions for the spread of the new corona virus.

The infection rates of COVID-19 as from March 2020 in Mauritius offer a startling distinction though. This paper attempts to explore how Mauritius responded strategically in terms of prevention, outbreak management and communication to the COVID-19 challenge through the 'Servant Leadership' philosophy of the Prime Minister and how the latter institutionalized this value to his Government, the Heads of Ministries, Front-liners and NGOs when the COVID-19 pandemic beckoned ominously.

One of the core tenets of servant leadership theory is that servant leaders instill in followers a desire to serve others. Research in this field has convincingly argued that servant leaders are uniquely effective in developing and nurturing service values among followers. More specifically, it is thought that servant leaders represent strong role models that influence followers via learning processes and vicarious experiences and, thus, eventually imbue the importance of service within their teams (Liden et al., 2014).

Greenleaf (1977) who coined the term servant leadership gave a broad definition and stated how to best measure the phenomenon:

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant—first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?

Many find it hard to accept the phenomenon of servant leadership because they do not understand how a servant can be a leader and how a leader can be a servant; that is, it seems to be an oxymoron. Graham (1991) identified humility, relational power, autonomy, moral development of followers, and emulation of leaders' service orientation as characteristics of servant leadership. De Pree (1992) listed 12 characteristics of leadership in which he included

integrity; vulnerability; discernment; awareness of the human spirit; courage in relationships; sense of humor; intellectual energy and curiosity; respect of the future, regard for the present, understanding of the past; predictability; breadth; comfort with ambiguity; and presence. Spears (1995) published a list of 10 critical characteristics of servant leadership based on Greenleaf's writings which included listening, empathy, healing, persuasion, awareness, foresight, conceptualizing, commitment to growth, stewardship, and community. Spears' list remains to this day the most respected and referred to list of servant leadership characteristics (Focht & Ponton, 2015). Though the above Spears' list is by no means exhaustive but open to considerable interpretation as well as value judgments; therefore an attempt is made to utilize the foresight, stewardship, conceptualizing, listening, healing, awareness and commitment to the growth of people characteristics, to analyze the Mauritian response to the COVID-19 challenge.

Foresight

Chinese authorities had started containment measures on 1 January 2020 and blocked all public transportation links between Wuhan and the rest of the world on 23 January. Meanwhile, cases were identified across other Asian countries. The Government of Mauritius willingly started screening people on arrival at its airport as from 22 January, introducing fever measurements and separation of at-risk passengers on 29 January. Based on the increasing number of COVID-19 cases worldwide, the Ministry of Health and Wellness issued several communiqués regarding travel restrictions from high risk countries. On 16 March 2020, Mauritius extended travel restrictions for a period of two weeks on foreign passengers coming from or having transited during the last 14 days in countries of the European Union, including the United Kingdom, Switzerland and also from Reunion Island. As for Mauritians coming from these countries, they were automatically placed in quarantine for a period of two weeks. (voxeu.org, 9 May 2020).

Still, COVID-19 arrived anyway. Official press briefings by the spokesperson of the National Communication Committee on COVID-19 later revealed that before 18 March 2020, 28 infected persons had already entered the island despite checks at air and sea ports (press briefings, May 2020).

Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future. It is also deeply rooted within the intuitive mind. Foresight remains a largely unexplored area in leadership studies, but one most deserving of careful attention. Based on the exploration of Greenleaf's foresight in his analysis, Wong (2014) suggests that this characteristic can in fact play a significant role in shaping strategies to mitigate risks, eliminate danger, and harvest growth in an organization or agency (Wong, 2014).

Rather than studying foresight in an organizational context, Slaughter (1995) examined the concept in a broader framework of future study. He argued that the future could not be predicted precisely, nor were there any "iron laws" or "blueprints" governing "the process of human or cultural development" that might contribute to shaping the future. Slaughter further postulated that instead of being an ability to view the future for what it precisely is, foresight is a "human attribute that allows us to weigh up pros and cons, to evaluate different courses of action and to invest possible futures on every level with enough reality and meaning to use them as decision-making aids" (Slaughter, 1995).

Stewardship

On 18th March, the first three cases were confirmed, Prime Minister Jugnauth set up a high-level ministerial Corona Virus Committee. This was the driving force behind the country's response, and included the ministers of health, finance, tourism, infrastructure and commerce. It was chaired personally by the Prime Minister. The committee met every day, including weekends, and sometimes meetings would go on for three hours. Initially the meetings were face to face – later, when one of the committee members became infected, they started meeting online.

"Having a Prime Minister meeting and chairing the meeting every day, it's a commitment that I have never seen in any other country," said Dr. Laurent Musango, who sat on the committee. Musango, a Rwandan physician with extensive public health experience, is the WHO's representative in Mauritius. He

played a key role in advising the Mauritian Prime Minister. Almost every day, the Prime Minister would call him or send him Whats App messages, asking for WHO guidelines on specific issues (Mail & Guardian, May 2020).

Robert Greenleaf's view of all institutions was one in which CEOs, staffs, and trustees all played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society. Servant-leadership, like stewardship, assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others. It also emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion rather than control.

Reinke (2004) explores the relationship between perceptions of leadership and the level of trust between employees and supervisors. More specifically, her article seeks to begin a theoretical discussion of a particular leadership approach, that is servant leadership and introduces an instrument for measuring servant leadership. The results show that one component of servant leadership, stewardship, is a determinant of trust level, indicating that "service before self" is not just a slogan, but a powerful reality that builds trust between employees and supervisors (Reinke, 2004).

Conceptualization

Upon the declaration of the first three confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Mauritius on Wednesday 18 March 2020 (Outbreak Day 1), Mauritius closed its international borders to all foreigners and even its citizens the following day (Day 2). Closure of all educational institutions also became effective the same day. The prevention strategy also consisted of community confinement. A national lockdown was implemented as from 20 March 2020 (Day 3) which was enforced into a curfew order on 23 March 2020 (Day 6). It is to be noted that the curfew order was extended thrice on 30 March, 10 April and 1 May and was valid until 30 May 2020 midnight (Sun & Wah, June 2020).

The ability to look at a problem or an organization from a conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities. For many leaders, this is a characteristic that requires discipline and practice. The traditional leader is consumed by the need to achieve short-term operational

goals. The leader who wishes to also be a servant leader must stretch his or her thinking to encompass broader-based conceptual thinking. Servant leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach.

Listening

Listening is described as the active acceptance of employees' opinions, ideas, and suggestions (Spears, 1995). Johnson and Bechler (1998) found strong positive relationships between listening skills and leadership emergence. Kramer (1997) tested interpersonal skills and found relationships between listening and transformational leadership effectiveness. Bechler and Johnson (1995) reported a relationship between listening skills and leadership effectiveness. These studies document the importance of listening skills for leadership effectiveness (Barbuto & Wheeler, June 2006).

The strategy adopted by the Mauritian authorities for the outbreak management followed the WHO recommendations (WHO, 2020). All confirmed COVID-19 cases were immediately transferred for isolation in dedicated treatment facilities. As highlighted by WHO Scientific and Technical Advisory Group for Infectious Hazards (STAG-IH), working with the WHO secretariat (Heymann & Shindo, Feb. 2020), close monitoring of the number of confirmed and suspected cases was undertaken in Mauritius. Acknowledgement is provided to the valuable contact tracing which was undertaken in a diligent manner by teams of health professionals for rapid isolation of cases. Laboratory testing of suspected cases by PCR started on 3 February 2020 in Mauritius and has been crucial in the diagnosis of the COVID-19 cases during the outbreak. Mass screening of frontline staff by rapid diagnostic testing started on 27 April 2020. As on 15 May 2020, 24,608 PCR tests and 60,867 rapid diagnostic tests had been carried out. (Sun & Wah, June 2020).

Leaders have traditionally been valued for their communication and decision-making skills. While these are also important skills for the servant-leader, they need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others. The servant-leader seeks to identify the will of a group and helps clarify that will. She or

he seeks to listen receptively to what is being said. Listening, coupled with regular periods of reflection, is essential to the growth of the servant-leader.

Healing

A servant-leader — with reported behaviour characteristics such as empathy, compassion, and altruistic calling and healing — builds not only a mentally and emotionally healthy workforce but also inculcates a sense of cohesiveness, collaboration, and sustainable relationships among the followers by understanding and addressing their feelings and emotions. The servant-leaders, with characteristics of empathy and compassion, are oriented towards the followers' suffering. This leads to empathic concern and compassion that trigger in them an urge to take action to relieve the followers' suffering. This action, also termed as compassionate responding, manifests itself in a three-step behaviour: (1) patient listening and discussion; (2) empathetic handling that includes comforting and calming as well as guiding and counseling the suffering employee; and (3) taking personal responsibility and providing support (emotional, social, financial, and administrative) (Jit et al.,2017).

The next stage of escalation of COVID-19 infections came on 24 March, when the number of detected infections had climbed to forty-two and people were still overcrowding supermarkets. The Prime Minister announced that the country would be under complete lock-down until 31 March 2020 with only essential services being operational. A total 'sanitary curfew' was instituted. Supermarkets, bakeries, and shops were no longer allowed to operate, with immediate effect. Evidently, the most vulnerable of the society would be affected by such draconian measures. The Government decided to undertake the following measures:

At the start of the lockdown, the government announced the immediate distribution of 35,000 food packs to families in poverty (as per the Social Register of Mauritius), to the disabled and to at-home residents. All labour contracts set to expire this year were extended through to December 2020. Wage and income support measures to employers were introduced, ranging from US\$125 to \$315 for workers with salaries below \$625 (15 days' salary basis) per month to \$315 for those in the \$625-1,300 range (through the Government Wage Assistance

Scheme). Workers earning over \$1,300 received no support. Self-employed individuals as well as trade persons in both the formal and the informal sector received financial support of US\$130 (equivalent to half of the monthly national minimum wage) through the Self-Employed Assistance Scheme (SEAC). These measures were extended until 31 May. The government also announced about 1.6% of GDP increase in spending along with extra tax deductions for SMEs (voxeu.org, 28 May 2020).

One of the great strengths of servant-leadership is the potential for healing one's self and others. Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is part of being human, servant-leaders recognize that they also have an opportunity to "help make whole" those with whom they come in contact.

Awareness

Servant-leaders lead through awareness and healing. A person with relation-awareness and situation-awareness is able to identify situational, historical, religious, cultural, and social elements in a complex situation (Song, 2018).

The data communicated on a daily basis by the National Communication Committee on COVID-19 was used to examine the effectiveness of the measures being undertaken to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. The daily communication of that information was considered an effective means of sensitizing the population to control the outbreak. From Outbreak Day 1 (18 March 2020) to Day 24 (10 April 2020), the number of confirmed cases increased daily from 3 to 318. That number started to stabilize and reached 332 on Day 40 (26 April 2020). On 15 May 2020, as the first phase of easing curfew restrictions began, no new COVID-19 case had been reported for nineteen consecutive days. On Day 20 (6 April 2020) the first four recoveries were reported, and the number of recovered patients kept increasing since that day. The number of active cases peaked at 286 on Day 24 (10 April 2020) with nine deaths. There was subsequently a steady decline, though there was an additional death on Day 41 (27 April 2020). Day 55 (11 May 2020) was an important date as there was zero active COVID-19 case in Mauritius (Sun & Wah, June 2020).

General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader. Awareness also aids one in understanding issues involving ethics and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position.

Commitment to the growth of people

Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As a result, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within the institution. The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything possible to nurture the growth of employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic is testing the limits of societies and economies across the world, and African countries are likely to be hit particularly hard. All possible resources are being rallied to help countries meet people's immediate health and survival needs while also safeguarding livelihoods and jobs in the longer term – including calling for a standstill on official bilateral debt service payments which would free up funds for strengthening health systems to deal with COVID-19 and save lives, social safety nets to save livelihoods and help workers who lose jobs, support to small and medium enterprises, and food security. Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa has been significantly impacted by the ongoing Corona virus outbreak and is forecast to fall sharply from 2.4% in 2019 to -2.1 to -5.1% in 2020, the first recession in the region over the past 25 years (World Bank, 2020).

Despite this bleak situation, the Government of Mauritius promptly committed around 12 billion rupees (\$300 million) to support its businesses and workers, even as the effect of COVID-19 is likely to be felt well into 2021 and beyond (voxeu.org, 9 May 2020).

Conclusion

For the Republic of Mauritius which had never handled a pandemic before, the response seemed effective with the required leadership. When human, political, economic, social and health stakes are high, Servant Leadership, as this study highlights, is not a 'soft' philosophy. The Prime Minister, through the COVID-19 challenge, was able to institutionalize Servant Leadership across key stakeholders at a crisis time.

1. People's highest priority needs had been served. The Government's prevention strategy to curb the pandemic curve worked. A major health disaster had been averted.
2. Those served grew as persons. Mauritians, while being served had become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous and aware of the handling of an epidemic. The age-old adage 'Health is Wealth' never perhaps rung so true. The sanitary curfew along with the 'early hard lockdown' was an illuminating experience for many on the island.
3. Authorities and public, after having garnered such an experience, went out and helped underprivileged countrymen and thus became servants in turn. The different financial assistance schemes provided will affect the country's reserves.
4. Yet a choice was made between health and wealth. The former won this time.

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