Moana as a Servant-Leader in Training

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Moana as a Servant-Leader in Training

In the recently released Disney film, Moana (2016), a young girl is destined to be the next chief of her community. Moana is shaped and coached by her parents from a young age to follow the ways of the village and do things the way they had been done for years. On the other hand, her grandmother developed Moana’s sense of adventure, intuition, and foresight as she grew into a teenager.

Early in the film, the village food sources became scarce. Moana shares a vision to sail past the reef where she believes fish are plentiful. Her parents react negatively, as does the village, given the perceived dangers of the ocean. Her grandmother, who is near death, believes Moana is right about her vision and encourages her to save their village.

The film *Moana* (2016) does an excellent job of portraying the developmental conflict that leaders have when deciding to follow a known path or taking the risks which could lead to a better outcome, which in this case benefits a community, not just Moana herself. It also draws a clear correlation to leadership development patterns as Moana matures as young adult. This paper explores Moana’s developmental servant-leadership journey where she transcends out of the internal conflict and accepts the challenges necessary to resolve the issues in the community.

# Servant-Leadership Assessment Model

This section outlines the servant-leader characteristics, concepts, and development model that will be used assess the primary character, Moana, in the film *Moana* (2016).

## Servant-Leadership Characteristics and Concepts

While many traits or attributes can be used to describe servant-leadership, the following characteristics are key: “listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to people, and community building.” (Spears, 1995, pp. 5-7). Developing each one of these characteristics is foundational to someone maturing into a servant-leader. The concepts of serving first as well as making a positive, lasting impact on others are also key to understanding servant-leadership. Servant-leaders seek to develop others and tend to focus on the collective versus be more self-serving. We’ll assess where the main character in the film falls in terms of these characteristics and concepts in the assessment findings section below.

## Servant-Leadership Development Model

For this paper, I’m going to use the Torbert and Fisher’s Developmental Model of Work and Leadership (Thompson, 2000, pp. 123 - 132) to study the stages a person goes through as they mature as a leader. Horsman (2017) shared that as we evaluate the stages of this model:

 “we should be able to identify examples of the skills of the impulsive, opportunist, diplomat, technician, achiever and strategist in the film even though the character may be an achiever or a strategist. Skills are cumulative; the skills of the impulsive, the opportunist, the diplomat and the technician are not left behind. Values become increasingly more complex and reflect successively greater world views. (Horsman, 2017).

Development occurs naturally as an individual learns from experiences; yet in other cases, direct feedback and training are necessary to reach higher leadership levels. I appreciate Thompson’s statement, “Later stages may aptly be called *higher* for precisely this reason: the person at a subsequent stage of development can appreciate the concerns and the logic employed by the Opportunist but has the capacity to *choose* to act from a broader perspective when the situation calls for it.” (Thompson, 2000, p. 125). Growth at the high stages seems to require more awareness, feedback, disciplined study or mentoring to master the stage and move on which is perhaps why there are fewer people aligned to the upper levels. The primary character in the film “Moana” moved through several of these development stages on her leadership development journey. We’ll look at a few examples in the assessment findings section.

# Servant-Leadership Assessment Findings

Moana will be our primary subject of study for this paper. She works through several situations that develops her leadership skills, specifically in the area of servant-leadership.

## Impulsive and Opportunistic

The film *Moana* (2016) highlights Moana’s childhood and early adult years. As a young child, she is impulsive when it comes to her desire to be near or in the water. She frequently sneaks away and plays on the beach. She shows some empathic signs by helping sea turtles navigate to the water without being eaten by birds. As she ages, she is more conscious of her choices, learning her parent’s view of right and wrong, yet is still drawn to the water and pushing boundaries. She struggles with following the customs of her village and her intuition which can be typical of a teenager perhaps in the Opportunist stage. One teaching moment between her and her grandma during this stage of development goes as follows:

“Moana: If there's something you want to tell me, just tell me! Is there something you wanna tell me?

Gramma Tala: Is there something you want to hear? (Moana, 2016).

## Diplomat

As Moana enters the Diplomat stage, she finds “the values and opinions of others have now become important” and fashions her “self-image around the approval of a certain core group” (Thompson, 2000, p.126) in this case the core group being her parents and the village. She begins to internalize and live out the lyrics of the song she sings:

“You must find happiness right where you are

You may hear a voice inside

The voice inside is who you are

Raise the island higher

It’s time to be who they need you to be

You are the future of our people” (Moana, 2016)

## Technologist

The story reaches a turning point when food becomes scarce and decisions must be made to provide for the community. Here we see Moana take on the challenge with a definitive desire to lead her community through this. The Technologist attributes are developed where she develops an “area of skill or expertise in which they feel they can excel” (Thompson, 2000, p. 126). In Moana’s case, she discovers her ancestors were voyagers and sailed the oceans. She becomes more determined to sail in order to save her village.

“I come back to the water no matter how hard I try

If I go, there’s no telling how far I can go

The voice inside sings a different song

It’s calling out to me” (Moana, 2016).

## Achiever

 In the next part of the story, Moana sets out to sea with the vision that she can fix what is wrong and is willing to face fear and the trials ahead. She feels deeply responsible for making things right and follows her inner voice which is at times channeling her grandmother in a religious way. During this period, Moana demonstrates Achiever attributes and learns a significant amount about herself and how to relate to others. She meets Maui, another key character in the film, and must persuade him to join her in the quest to make things right. When they meet, Maui is a very self-centered individual who expects praise for everything he’s already done, is only looking out for himself, and has no interest in helping anyone with their goals.

Moana intuitively leverages persuasion and plays to Maui’s need to be a hero. She continues that line of thinking to engage him initially to follow, then later in the story she’s able to change his way of thinking to be not so self-centered. He begins to feel good about helping others and working for collective good under the guidance of Moana. This is in line with a statement made by Thompson that reads:

 “The personal vision must engender enthusiasm in others, induce their commitment, and translate into their own individual matrices of meaning and purpose. … They are able to appeal not just to our reason and logic but to our deeply felt emotions as well. When the vision touches on our ultimate values and our longer for the things of God, they even have the power to appeal to us at the level of our spirituality” (Thompson, 2000, p. 191).

Together the two main characters make right what was wrong. They returned the heart that was stolen by Maui and, for the viewers who followed the metaphors, this emphasized how important the heart and love is to the world. Without love, there was fear and anger. By giving the heart back, there was healing and wholeness again throughout the islands.

## Summary

Moana developed key servant leadership characteristics (awareness, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to people, and community building) throughout the film. She demonstrated the serving-first characteristic by desiring to bring healing to the community. Near the end of the film, Moana is welcomed home to the village where the fish are once again plentiful and the hillsides are green. She helped them return to their past and become voyagers again. Moana passed Greenleaf’s Best Test (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 4) in this case as a servant-leader in training, by helping Maui develop from an opportunistic individual to one that cared more about the collective. Her village became healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous and more likely become servants (Greenleaf, 1998, p.4) due to Moana’s leadership and example.

“Remember who you are

I am everything I’ve learned and more

It’s inside me

The tide is always falling and rising

You remind me

That come what may

I know the way” (Moana, 2016).

# Conclusion

The film, *Moana* (2016), provides a leadership development story that many can relate to, follow, and be inspired by. The narrative may follow a typical Disney recipe, but is one that offers learning and insight for many audiences. I was pleasantly surprised at the ties to many of the servant leader characteristics as well as to Torbert and Fisher’s Developmental Model of Work and Leadership (Thompson, 2000, pp. 123 – 132). While some parts of the model didn’t apply as well, the general framework was followed.

The following discusses how her South Pacific culture may have influenced the film’s storyline and outcomes:

In an article titled “Pluralistic Reflections on Servant- Leadership,” Juana Bordas has written: “Many women, minorities and people of color have long traditions of servant-leadership in their cultures. Servant-leadership has very old roots in many of the indigenous cultures. Cultures that were holistic, cooperative, communal, intuitive and spiritual. These cultures centered on being guardians of the future and respecting the ancestors who walked before.” (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 13).

In this film, there were definitive ties to ancestry and a sense of spiritual guidance throughout. The sense of community and cooperative nature of the villagers was present. Moana respected the traditions but also provided a path to become whole again. Moana demonstrated several servant-leader in training characteristics while on her journey through this film.

Analyzing the main character of this film helped me further gain appreciation for the many angles of servant-leadership. As outlined in the Servant-leader Concentration: Dispositions, Capacities, Values & Skills, the following are key capacities that one has when consistently performing at a servant-leader level. A servant-leader:

* models a principle-centered empathetic moral capacity
* promotes individual and collective actualization
* listens-first seeking clarity before influence
* practices foresight

The few individuals that consistently work at this level are ones that have both innate and learned skills with significant experience in developing others. As Horsman outlines in his writings, “developing a servant consciousness involves building within ourselves and our organizations systems and strategies that will nurture our capacity for greater personal and collective integrated wholeness” (Horsman, 2017, p.30). He documents throughout his writings that working towards a true state of servant-leadership is one that few can achieve and sustain, yet that doesn’t mean that one shouldn’t strive to develop and hone these traits and characteristics. I will continue to study, learn, and practice as well as encourage others to do the same.

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