


Fall October 1st, 2011

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## Recommended Citation

McKenna, R., & Brown, T. (2011). Does sacrificial leadership have to hurt? The realities of putting others first. *Organization Development Journal*, 29(3), 39-50.

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# Does Sacrificial Leadership Have to Hurt? The Realities of Putting Others First

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## Abstract

Sacrificial leadership has generally been associated with positive outcomes for organizations and employees. While it is often desired by organizations, we suggest that current organizational systems often fail to promote sacrificial behaviors. We present a new perspective sacrificial leadership that includes character-based elements such as humility, a willingness to calculate the cost of leading and the courage to be irrelevant in the presence of systems that pressure leaders to behave otherwise. We discuss how these elements are often not encouraged in current selection, employee development, and succession planning processes.



In the past few years, poor leadership decisions on the allocation of company resources have contributed to mass bailouts of American banks and auto makers. The blame for these events has primarily been placed on corporate leadership with almost two-thirds of the public believing that executives are to blame (Newport, 2009).

However, to place all the blame on potential character flaws in these leaders may be just as dangerous as the decisions that were being made by them. What if our systems for developing these leaders were flawed as well? What if these leaders were doing what they were encouraged and hired to do, acting according to an invisible creed that has become socially acceptable in our corporate society? While greed may be unacceptable to us, we are more than willing to encourage these leaders to make certain decisions if there is a benefit to us.



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The problem begins when this self-preserving behavior begins to sabotage our ability to achieve the goals we desire for organizations and leaders. If it is true that it is necessary for leaders to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their people or for the cause of their organizations, what questions become important when we select leaders, and what processes will we put in place to develop a new generation of leaders? One question rises to the top: What are we doing to select, develop, and reward leaders who are willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of doing the right thing? If the right thing has something to do with sacrificial behaviors and considerations, as we are arguing here, are we willing to support leaders who are willing to consider, let alone pay, the personal costs of leading us?

Our focus is on sacrificial leadership as a different paradigm for what it means to lead well, and how it differs from seemingly related concepts that involve service, transformational leadership, and servant leadership. Specifically, this paper discusses the concept of sacrificial leadership within the framework of three very common organizational practices for managing talent: selection processes, employee development, and succession planning.

### **Sacrificial Leadership**

The challenge with defining sacrificial leadership and attempting to target or even understand the relationship to positive outcomes is significant. The fact is that most sacrificial leaders do not consider outcomes as their primary motive. Their motivation is often grounded in a choice to follow their personal principles of doing what is necessary for their followers, or out of obedience to a greater transcendent voice in their lives (i.e., God,

mentors, role models, etc.) whom they perceive as calling them to make considerable sacrifices. Nevertheless, there is evidence that sacrificial leadership behaviors can have an impact. To approach leadership from a truly sacrificial position highlights an awareness on the potential costs of leading a group of people, and a willingness to consider paying those high personal costs if necessary. It does not necessarily mean that a leader must sacrifice getting credit, their reputation, or their job, but it certainly implies a consideration of the possibility.

Sacrifice involves the denial of individual interests, privileges or personal comfort and safety for the benefit of others (Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1998). In the work environment, this relates directly to the sacrifices leaders are willing to make for their employees. For instance, there are several organizational situations in which a leader may be perceived as sacrificial by his or her followers. These include self-sacrifice in the division of labor, in the distribution of rewards, and in the exercise of power. In these situations, leaders may take responsibility for failures they are not individually responsible for creating, give up company rewards, or choose not to exercise their power for the sake of protecting others who may be exposed to danger for one reason or another.

Sacrificial leadership, as we are discussing it here, includes at least three components: A willingness to *calculate the cost* of leading, a *realistic reluctance* about being a leader, and the *courage to be irrelevant* in the presence of people and organizations that pressure us toward being relevant, and subsequently, making decisions that are about satisfying the need for relevance at the risk of missing the needs of those who actually need something different.

There are several ways of viewing leadership that certainly approach what we are defining as sacrificial leadership. Some of the more prevalent concepts include servant leadership, charismatic or transformational leadership, as well as a position that highlights the values or character traits of courage and humility. While a focus on the character of a leader is certainly relevant to sacrificial leadership, we are proposing that sacrificial leadership requires a leader to think, discern, and choose at a level that is challenging because it requires leaders to work hard to consider what is at stake for themselves and for others at each step in their leadership journey.

## Related Concepts of Leadership

### Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is closely related to the practice and concept of sacrificial leadership (Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1999) and it has been broadly defined as putting others first and serving their needs (Whetstone, 2002). A more in depth definition of this construct includes behaviors related to transformational and authentic leadership (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008). For example, voluntary subordination, presenting one's authentic self, and responsible morality are considered characteristics of a servant leader. According to Hamilton and Bean (2005), servant leadership is a method of serving the needs of all individuals involved in an organization and its functioning. While some of these aspects of leadership are similar to those of a sacrificial leader (e.g., putting others first and serving other's needs), we view sacrificial leadership as more deeply connected to personal character that involves a variety of components and personal costs that are often difficult for a leader to swallow.

While similar, the concept of sacrificial leadership goes one step beyond the concept of servant leadership as it is not only a consideration of the needs of others, but a willingness to consider the personal costs of making those considerations. For instance, sacrificial leaders not only know the needs of others, they possess a willingness to calculate what is at stake for themselves, and they possess the courage to act in ways that may be irrelevant from others' points of view in order to do what is best for those they lead. These components allow sacrificial leaders to remain grounded during times of prosperity and times of despair. The complexity of this construct and a willingness to do what is best for others is what differentiates it from simply serving the needs of those in the organization.

### **Charismatic/Transformational Leadership**

In addition to the concept of servant leadership, similar theories of charismatic/transformational leadership have been used to describe exceptional leaders who have inspirational effects on their followers (Bass, 1995; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). This concept is certainly related to sacrificial leadership. For instance, these types of leaders may engage in sacrificial behaviors to gain follower trust. This allows them to obtain positive outcomes such as gaining follower commitment to the overall mission and inspiring followers to self-sacrifice for the good of the mission. In addition, charismatic or transformational leaders often give individual consideration to followers' needs for the purpose of developing them. However, these leaders are primarily focused on influencing followers to place the collective good and their own mission above personal self-interest (de Hoogh, den Hartog, Koopman, Thierry, van den

Berg, van der Weide, & Wilderom, 2004). This focus on influencing others is not a component of sacrificial leadership as we are describing it here. Instead, sacrificial leadership is more "other focused" in the sense that a sacrificial leader is willing to put everything on the line for his or her followers. Thus, the concept of sacrificial leadership is more concerned with doing what is best for one's followers as opposed to inspiring others to commit to one's personal mission.

### **Leadership Character and Sacrifice**

As we seek to understand the character we are seeking in leaders, it is easy to consider the opposite of what we want. For example, narcissism, and its focus on self-absorption, superiority, and entitlement to resources or admiration from others (Emmons, 1984), is obviously an undesirable trait for a leader to have (Blair, Hoffman, & Helland, 2008; Penney & Spector, 2002). However, focusing our attention on the dark side of sacrifice often causes us to ignore the missing pieces of the character definitions we find so appealing. We are suggesting that even some of the most commonly accepted character dimensions such as courage and humility must be considered more deeply to be helpful in the selection, development, and rewarding of leaders. In addition, we are proposing that popular character related concepts such as courage and humility, when considered through a sacrificial leadership lens, must be explicitly connected to the personal costs that a leader is or is not willing to pay.

### **Courage**

While it undoubtedly takes courage to be a leader, understanding courage in the context of sacrificial leadership operates in a dynamic tension with

fear. In the typical sense, leaders who act courageously do so in spite of fear. They are often under an enormous amount of pressure to take specific actions and move forward, in spite of the needs of their followers who may have different or opposing needs and fears. While their actions may be in congruence with the wants and needs of other leaders in the organization or the majority of their followers, the courage they possess to go against others, especially those they lead, may not be grounded in a value system that highlights the necessity for the consideration of personal sacrifice.

Sacrificial leaders must have courage, and that courage must be grounded in the realities and fears of what is at stake for them and those they lead. This is why we have placed importance on the concept of reluctance as a healthy character trait that leaders must carry. They are in touch with all that is at stake for themselves and for those they lead in any decision they make. Furthermore, sacrificial leaders carry a healthy sense of reluctance when it comes to leading. These leaders think about what is at stake for themselves and their followers and they proceed by taking actions that ultimately benefit their followers, in spite of the pressure to make it all about themselves. This type of courage involves more than just the willingness to move forward in spite of opposition; it requires a willingness to put oneself on the line for one's followers even after realizing that it may result in a significant personal cost.

## **Humility**

Humility is a characteristic that is often valued in leaders; however, it is not always seen as a favorable quality in leaders (Exline & Geyer, 2004).

This is somewhat surprising considering that humility primarily entails a focus on others as opposed to a focus on oneself (Tangney, 2002). Furthermore, humility encompasses an openness toward others and their ideas, and a willingness to serve them. This character trait requires leaders to put their capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses in perspective in order to effectively serve those they lead. Although it may be a quality that is often viewed more favorably for leaders in religious contexts than for leaders in business contexts (Exline & Geyer, 2004), humility is a necessary characteristic for those who strive to be sacrificial for the sake of their followers.

## **Outcomes of Sacrificial Leadership**

While sacrificial situations often come at a great cost to the leader, research in this area has often focused on the positive follower outcomes of sacrificial leadership (Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1999; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). For example, the effects of sacrificial leadership have been studied in conjunction with autocratic behaviors on follower emotions and motivation (De Cremer, 2006). Specifically, sacrificial leadership and autocratic behaviors have been considered in relationship to followers' motivational and emotional reactions. The results have highlighted a positive influence of sacrificial leadership on follower emotions and motivation to work with the leader. Other studies have examined leader self-sacrifice and the concept of collective identification on follower self-esteem (De Cremer, van Knippenberg, van Dijke, & Bos, 2006). Findings indicated that leader self-sacrifice positively influenced follower self-esteem, especially when the leader displayed a strong collective identification with the group. Research also suggests that sacrificial leadership can motivate followers to engage

in prosocial behaviors such as cooperation and organizational citizenship behavior (De Cremer, Mayer, van Dijke, Schouten, & Bardes, 2009). The results of these studies have valuable implications for sacrificial leadership in the workplace and these findings express the positive outcomes associated with sacrificial behaviors. However, this tendency to focus on the outcomes of sacrificial leadership is quite counterintuitive when considering the selfless motivation behind this type of leadership.

Although it is important to focus on the outcomes of sacrificial behaviors in the workplace, the actual concept of sacrificial leadership is not outcome focused in a typical sense. For instance, a sacrificial leader is not primarily concerned with outcomes that may be personally beneficial. Rather, a sacrificial leader is one who is "other focused" and willing to consider making great sacrifices for his or her followers. Thus, the motivation behind sacrificial behavior is likely to differ from that of other types of leaders.

### **Costs Associated with Sacrifice**

Organizations must begin to understand the specific behaviors and characteristics of sacrificial leaders and the personal costs that sacrificial leaders are willing to consider for the sake of leading well. To comprehend the extent of the costs paid by sacrificial leaders, it is helpful to consider common sacrificial situations faced by leaders (Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1999). When a leader accepts the blame for accidents or failures where he or she may or may not be exclusively responsible, it undoubtedly costs the leader in one way or another. In the worst cases, it may cost the leader his or her job, or even legal action against them personally. At the very least, it may cost the

leader a portion of his or her pride. In addition, sacrificial behaviors associated with the distribution of rewards, may have a monetary cost to the leader and their personal comfort.

A recent example of this occurred when the CEOs of General Motors and Ford flew on their private company jets to Washington D.C. to ask the U.S. government for bailout money. After receiving much public criticism for their costly transportation, both CEOs sold their company jets and bought fuel efficient cars as replacements (Rood, 2008). While the motive behind the actions of these could be questioned, there is a lot we do not know. What personal sacrifices occurred behind the scenes as these leaders had to make decisions about what it meant to serve their followers and make things right? We may never know. The fact is that a leader's ego, confidence, resources, and eventual success are a part of what it means to be sacrificial. Like these CEOs, these are the costs leaders have to be willing to pay. Most leaders may not have private jets, but they have their own personal costs to consider.

The current economic environment not only impacted General Motors. Citigroup CEO Vikram Pandit, and AIG CEO Edward Liddy, agreed to reduce their salaries to a mere \$1 per year in response to receiving billions in taxpayer bailout money from the U.S government (Augstums, 2008; DeCambre, 2009). While it could be argued that this type of sacrifice may seem necessary to save the reputations of these CEOs, the monetary costs paid by these leaders is nevertheless, sacrificial. However, in an ideal organization, sacrificial behaviors should be evident in times of prosperity as well as in times of financial crisis. So, why are sacrificial behaviors so prominent in difficult times? Why must organ-

izations “hit the bottom” before some leaders take responsibility for their bad decisions? An explanation for this may lie in the many challenges that leaders must face throughout their careers.

## **The Challenges Faced by Sacrificial Leaders**

In addition to the costs associated with sacrificial leadership, there are other significant challenges that leaders face. For instance, sacrificial leaders continually face the challenge of remaining sacrificial throughout their leadership journey due to their many successes and increased power they gain along the way (McKenna, 2008). Increases in salary and stock benefits may cause leaders to get “caught up” in their success and lose sight of what’s really important to them and the people they lead. A sacrificial leader has to remain grounded during these times of prosperity. This involves continuously taking responsibility for one’s actions and making sacrifices that are in the best interest of the organization and its employees, even if the personal cost is high.

## **Sacrificial Leadership and Organizational Systems**

The burden for changing the paradigm is not solely on the shoulders of individual leaders. There are a number of organizational systems that pressure leaders to act in ways that are less than sacrificial. Instead of encouraging leaders to consider acting sacrificially (expressing a healthy reluctance to lead, calculating the costs, and possibly paying the costs), our organizational systems often pressure leaders to appear over-confident, over-convicted, and bigger than life. Some of the most common organizational systems that compel leaders to behave this way include selection processes, employee development, and succession

planning. Our goal is to describe the processes in the context of sacrificial leadership in order to better understand the way they may discourage leaders from displaying sacrificial leadership behaviors and characteristics. Our purpose here is not to provide the details for how to change these systems, but to simply highlight the organizational values that could be encouraged to increase the possibility of selecting, developing, and rewarding leaders of the highest character.

## **Selection**

What is the purpose of a leadership selection process? The purposes and definitions are many. For instance, the purpose is to find an individual who will fit well with the organization (Herriot, 2003), possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform a job (Kristof-Brown, 2001) and/or fit well within a particular work team (McClough & Rogelberg, 2003). Obviously, the answer varies depending upon an organization’s value system, and needs. Therefore, let us be clear that we are suggesting a purpose for leadership selection that is driven by the assumption that sacrificial leadership matters, and it is just as important as any set of leadership competencies and skills that candidates may bring to the table. That’s an important assumption because if we are to take the stand that the character of a leader matters, we must then make explicit statements about the kind of character traits we are looking for in leaders. For our purposes, we are suggesting that a leader with sacrificial character is someone that understands the personal and organizational costs associated with any decision they make, is willing to calculate and examine those costs, and willing to pay those costs if necessary. These are not abstract costs or costs that are always easy to calculate in a spreadsheet, but often valued, personal costs to the leader and to the organizations and



people they serve.

In a typical selection process, applicants are required to submit a resume and if their qualifications appear to be a good match for the position, they may be contacted for an interview. During this process, the applicant typically attempts to appeal to interviewers on paper as well as in person. In the actual interview, the interviewee often tries to present him or herself in a manner that will impress the interviewer. The underlying assumptions in this paradigm, which tends to promote and reward confidence and self-assuredness, leaves little room for leaders to express reluctance or regret. For instance, it does not allow leaders to be open in conveying an honest reluctance about taking the position of leader. A sacrificial leader would understand that the stakes are high for their potential followers, and therefore, reluctance would be healthy. In addition, this process does not allow leaders to be real about mistakes they made in the past. In a sense, this type of selection process may encourage faking; it pressures leaders to appear confident that they can take on any task no matter how difficult (Marcus, 2009). Or, it may simply increase the likelihood of selecting candidates with character issues that will surface later. The number of studies on faking behavior in interviews is some indication that this is certainly important. Instead of focusing our attention on weeding out the fakers, what if we began to encourage leaders to bring their strengths, weaknesses, victories, and mistakes to the table? If an individual has realistically calculated the cost of leading, he or she needs to be supported in expressing a healthy reluctance to lead in their new job.

While many organizations might desire leaders who behave sacrificially for those they lead, selec-

tion processes do not always encourage actions that are characteristic of a sacrificial leader. A selection system should encourage individuals to be themselves and express honest regret and reluctance. However, as long as selection processes tend to promote confidence and eagerness alone, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish sacrificial leaders from everyone else. We are not suggesting that our current processes are broken, but that a consideration of the complex tensions in the life and decisions of a leader will offer the possibility of selecting truly sacrificial leaders. Interview processes and competency requirements should make explicit, the need for leaders who are willing to take responsibility for their mistakes (McKenna & Yost, 2004), who express a healthy reluctance to lead, and who show evidence of their considering paying high personal costs in the face of challenging decisions (McKenna, 2008). The reality is that we have all made mistakes, but we are often discouraged from openly talking about them when interviewing for a leadership position because it may be perceived as a character flaw that will reappear later. While we are not suggesting that character flaws are never the issue, we are contending that there is a difference between being human and having mistakes that will show up again and again.

### **Employee Development**

If you are a leader, what is the personal benefit to you on developing your people? While there is strong evidence that it leads to positive outcomes for individuals and organizations (Huselid, 1995), what is in it for the leader? In addition, how does investing in the development of the people you manage impact your performance? The fact is that spending time developing employees will cost a leader something. While the payout might

be on the horizon and it may feel good to invest in other people, spending time in conversations with employees about what they are learning and taking the time to document that learning will cost a leader something. Oftentimes, the goals leaders set for themselves may not be accomplished. Failure to accomplish these goals is more than an issue of prioritization. The pressure to perform, to produce results, and to get the job done, is significant. The kind of leader we are describing is aware of the time and investment required to truly develop those they lead. Unfortunately, many performance management systems are not structured in a way that encourages investing in others. Many of these systems require leaders to focus on results that may or may not be connected to developing others. In order to move against the grain of these systems, leaders have to work around the system, or be willing to consider paying the high price of not reaching their business results; that is a tough choice to make. Furthermore, even in organizations where developing others is encouraged, the reality of the need for results is very powerful. Beginning to encourage these sacrificial behaviors on the part of leaders is certainly a first step.

Like selection systems, performance management systems are rarely structured in a manner that rewards sacrificial behaviors. For instance, many do not encourage leaders to spend business time meeting with employees to discuss their development and in this way, discourage leaders from investing intentionally in others. Sacrificial leaders realize what it takes to invest in others and make the time to have developmental conversations with those they lead, despite the cost involved. These individuals are committed to their followers and understand that while there may be benefits, there will also be costs. While the

benefit of feeling good about developing others is a real possibility, it is still costly in the daily grind of the average leader.

### **Succession Planning**

What is succession planning? It has been defined as a strategic planning tool for organizations (Kim, 2003). While we know what succession planning is about, the most important question concerns purpose. For instance, why do we have succession planning systems? The answer is important because it probably tells us something about how succession planning is actually done within a particular organization. While we know what it is, we often fail to dig down deep into the purposes and motivations behind succession planning. Without digging to that deeper level, we risk developing systems that are somewhat selfish and narcissistic in nature. For our purposes, we define succession planning as a process of developing the next generation of leaders to lead when our current generation of leaders is no longer relevant. That means that short of an enduring memory of their legacy, we are preparing people to lead when the leaders we have in place today no longer matter.

The challenge is that many of our current systems are not truly succession planning systems, but would be more accurately described as legacy planning systems. In other words, we often create systems focused on making sure other people lead the same way we lead, as if we will matter in the future. Practical examples of this are in abundance. Organizations are full of leaders who, after they retire or move to a different group, continue to try to get their agenda done. In some cases they are dragged back in by shareholders, board members, or former employees who are dissatisfied with their new leader. Nevertheless,

the challenge to develop succession planning systems built upon sacrificial leadership as their foundation is significant. Building this type of system requires tremendous courage and sacrifice on the part of incumbent leaders and a willingness to develop leaders apart from our selfish tendencies to build a legacy instead of preparing individuals to lead after we are gone.

Even more than selection and performance management process, an effective succession planning process has to be explicitly sacrificial. First, sacrificial leaders courageously develop leaders who will lead their own way, and will be able to lead well when they are gone. This is challenging, especially in organizations that have been built on the kind of personality that is the incumbent leader. Second, as stated in our argument for rethinking employee development, sacrificial leaders will invest in the development and learning of the leaders coming behind them, in spite of the high personal cost they may have to pay. Third, sacrificial leaders must get out of the way when they leave, and they have to stay out of the way. Businesses, churches, athletic teams, and government agencies are full of examples of leaders who left and then came back to organization in times of turmoil or financial difficulty. While there are certainly times that leaders should make the sacrifice to come back and lead again, financial turmoil is not always the issue. Were the successors properly developed to lead in their own way and with their own strengths? In other words, was the new leader supported and did the previous leader get out of the way? Did the incumbent leader invest in the development of successors early enough, or was it done only after his or her leaving was announced? Whatever the reason, what is clear is the need to think deeply about the real purpose of succession planning and

the need for leaders who will consider paying the costs of identifying, developing, and supporting the success of their successor.

## Summary

As we have suggested, sacrificial leadership is about encouraging behaviors, selecting, and developing a different kind of leader. Sacrificial leaders are aware of the personal costs of leading others well, and are willing to consider paying those costs through their investments of time and their willingness to take responsibility in various situations. As we stated earlier, we are suggesting that conviction, a drive for results, and many other competencies are necessary in leadership. We are also suggesting that left alone, a list of competencies is not enough. We have attempted to identify and state a number of necessary values while acknowledging that leadership character is complex. We are suggesting that sacrificial leadership goes one step further than servant leadership, transformational leadership, and definitions of character as these stand today. Investigating what sacrificial leadership is about and how to find the right leaders is not only about the outcomes that these behaviors provide, but about a willingness to get real about the values we are choosing and rewarding over other more meaningful values. A convicted, competent, and courageous leader who lacks the ability to express remorse, regret, or reluctance is far more dangerous than an incompetent leader who has taken responsibility for their mistakes. In these situations, hiring decisions that took us two weeks to make, can take us a year to untangle. As we have seen in the previous months and years, the costs are very high for leaders and for their stakeholders.

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