SERVANT LEADERSHIP

By Christine Rivenq

This short note is based on the following article:


INTRODUCTION

Servant leadership (SL) is considered part of the positive organizational behaviour field of study. It is a form of leadership focusing on the personal growth of followers. There is no current consensus on its precise definition and underlying theoretical framework.

Most of what has been written about SL has been prescriptive; only a few studies have been devoted to describing practice.

The term was first formulated by Robert K. Greenleaf in the 1970s and has been discussed by different authors for the last 40 years. Empirical studies have been conducted on SL for the last decade.

This is Greenleaf’s definition:

The Servant-Leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. . . . The best test, and difficult to administer is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not further be harmed? (1977: 7)

Basically, the Servant-leader is motivated by wanting to develop conditions within the organization to encourage followers to reach full potential. They are appreciated by their followers because they are considered reliable and committed. Their leadership functions through persuasion and emulation. They are stewards, at the service of the organization as a whole. Followers will become servant leaders later on.

DEFINITION & CHARACTERISTICS

Larry C Spears (1995) determined a list of 10 essential characteristics of a servant-leader. (NB Spears was former director of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.):

1. Listening, emphasizing the importance of communication and seeking to identify the will of the people;
2. Empathy, understanding others and accepting how and what they are;
3. Healing, the ability to help make whole;
4. Awareness, being awake;
5. Persuasion, seeking to influence others relying on arguments not on positional power;
6. Conceptualization, thinking beyond the present-day need and stretching it into a possible future;
7. Foresight, foreseeing outcomes of situations and working with intuition;
8. Stewardship, holding something in trust and serving the needs of others;
9. Commitment to the growth of people, nurturing the personal, professional and spiritual growth of others;
10. Building community, emphasizing that local communities are essential in a person’s life.

These have never reformulated as a model for empirical testing.

Other authors have expanded on this basis – Van Dierendonck calculates there now to be models identifying 44 different characteristics associated with Servant Leadership but these can be regrouped into 6 major items:

1. Empowering and developing people,
2. Humility,
3. Authenticity,
4. Interpersonal acceptance,
5. Providing direction,

### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND OTHER LEADERSHIP THEORIES

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<tr>
<th>Transformational Leadership (see Burns, 1978 and Bass, 1985)</th>
<th>SL</th>
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<td>Primary allegiance is to the organization. Personal growth of followers is seen as good for performance and therefore good for the organization and the leader. Risk of manipulation of followers by leader. Risk of narcissism in leader. Focus on organizational objectives.</td>
<td>Allegen to the individual rather than the organization. Followers are trusted to perform well. Shared vision. Focus on creating conditions to foster well-being. Leader displays humility, authenticity and interpersonal acceptance.</td>
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<th>Authentic Leadership (see Avolio &amp; Gardner, 2005)</th>
<th>SL</th>
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<td>Leader works through heightened self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized transparency, and internalized moral perspective to encourage authenticity in followers. Responsibility for oneself and for others. Possibility of placing shareholder value above well-being of follower (this being a moral obligation of a manager).</td>
<td>Stewardship - willingness to place others at the fore. All stakeholders have priority.</td>
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<th>Ethical Leadership (see Brown, 2005)</th>
<th>SL</th>
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<td><strong>Listening.</strong> Defending/promoting best interests of employees.</td>
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<td><strong>Level 5 Leadership (see Collins, 2001)</strong></td>
<td>SL</td>
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<td><strong>Empowering Leadership (see Bandura, 1986 plus Erez &amp; Arad, 1986)</strong></td>
<td>SL</td>
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<td><strong>Spiritual Leadership (see Sendjaya, Sarros &amp; Santora, 2008)</strong></td>
<td>SL</td>
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<td>Creation of a sense of calling. Focus on organizational culture (to intrinsically motivate &amp; help followers to find a sense of meaning). Followers feel understood and part of a community. No clear definition of what the behaviour is that a spiritual leader has.</td>
<td>Secular theory avoiding the confusion of the term “spirituality” which has different meanings in different cultural environments. Focus on the follower. Overlap with certain outcomes but more explanation of the bases of the relationship that exists between leader and follower.</td>
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<td><strong>Self-sacrificing Leadership (see Choi &amp; Mai-Dalton, 1999)</strong></td>
<td>SL</td>
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<td>“Total/partial abandonment, and/or permanent/temporary postponement of personal interests, privileges or welfare in the (1) division of labor, (2) distribution of rewards and (3) exercise of power.”(Choi &amp; Mai-Dalton) Self-sacrificing behaviour of leader is supposed to lead to more charisma, legitimacy and reciprocity. Followers have higher positive emotions and stronger pro-social behaviour. Derives from transformational leadership. Focus on the organization.</td>
<td>Many similarities but focus is on developing the follower. The organization is not the primary objective.</td>
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**MEASURING SERVANT LEADERSHIP**

A variety of measures exists which have been developed by different authors on the basis of their own interpretations of Greenleaf’s work.
1. Laub (1999): measure of organizational culture and leadership, one of the first measures, still used in doctoral research.
4. Dennis & Bocarnea (2005): can represent only half of the dimensions.
7. Van Dierendonck and Nuitjen\(^1\): covers all six dimensions.

Several other measures examine just one aspect.

### REQUISITES

The distinguishing feature of servant leadership is the motivation to **become a leader with a need to serve**. These are consecutive – one leads to the other – but the order may be reversed (motivation-to-lead leads to need-to-serve/need-to-serve leads to a motivation-to-lead).

**Individual traits**

Certain characteristics are likely to be associated with people displaying Servant Leadership qualities:

1. Self-determination (feeling competent, feeling connected to others, feeling autonomous) – power is not sought for its own sake.
2. Moral cognitive development – six-stage development, final stage of mutual respect becomes the Servant-leader’s guiding principle (how things appear from the other person’s perspective) – very important for ethical intention and ethical behaviour.
3. Cognitive complexity – ability to perceive social behaviour in a differentiated way, enables accurate evaluation of social situations.

**Organizational/social culture**

The development of Servant Leadership is influenced by the type of organizational (or social) culture of the environment:

1. Humane orientation – “degree to which an organization or society encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, friendly, generous, caring and kind to others” (Kabasakal and Bodur, 2004) – work as a means of acknowledging the need to belong, of taking care of others, of tolerating mistakes.
2. Power distance – “the extent to which a community accepts and endorses authority, power differences and status privileges orientation” (Carl, Gupta and Javidan, 2004) – high power distance equates with obedience to authority, centralized organizations; low power distance equates with decentralized decision making. Low power distance cultures are expected to be more open to Servant Leadership in organizations – greater equality between leader and follower, higher possibility for focus on personal growth.

### LEADER/FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP

The following features are present:

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1. The leader recognizes the intrinsic value of the individual follower – the follower is acknowledged, allowed to realize his/her potential and is given space to learn.
2. The leaders show humility – they do not have all the answers.
3. Relationships are characterized by mutual trust, respect and obligation (see LMX (Leader-Member Exchange) Theory for exploring relational dynamics).
4. Servant-leaders rely on persuasion and are focused on building consensus. They privilege influencing tactics, explanations, reasoning and facts that result in the voluntary adhesion of followers.
5. Servant-leaders create high quality relationships which generate high follower engagement.
6. Followers feel safe and trusted. They are empowered and have room to make mistakes. Servant-leaders create a safe psychological climate where employees are treated sensitively and fairly, thus encouraging positive job attitudes and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) which help contribute to team effectiveness and organizational performance.
7. Possible element of reciprocity in the relationship – servant-leaders influence the behaviour of followers who, by responding positively, consequently encourage the leaders to treat them well (positive feedback loop).

**CRITIQUE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP**

1. Tendency to be too idealistic: earlier writing on the topic was prescriptive. The current trend of empirical descriptive research is therefore welcomed by the author.
2. The word “servant” has connotations of passivity, even of weakness on the part of managers – this makes the term difficult for certain leaders to accept.
3. Risk of leaders being manipulated by particular followers – this makes it important to focus on the “providing direction” role of Servant Leadership which counteracts any tendencies for followers to shirk their responsibility for doing their work.
4. Methodologies for measuring Servant Leadership need to be thoroughly validated as do those for measuring its predicted outcomes. (The author proposes a methodology for measuring SL in a later article written with Nuijten²).
5. An understanding of the implications of time (need for longitudinal studies) and of cross-cultural differences (need for different national contexts to be analyzed and compared) is important. Only a few studies are available at present.
6. Further empirical observation and testing is required to explore the concept further.

² See previous footnote.