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Servant Leadership: A Conceptualization

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Abstract

Servant leadership has garnered increased attention over the last few decades. While many articles have been written about the concept, none have outlined a comprehensive approach to servant leadership that outlines not only the leader's orientation (e.g. Greenleaf, 2002; Greenleaf, 2003), but also specific traits (e.g. Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015), behaviors (e.g. Sipe and Frick, 1993; Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015), and attributes (e.g. Greenleaf, 2002). This research builds upon the prior research and integrates the various aspects previously researched and conceptualizes a comprehensive, integrated model of servant leadership that combines core attributes, behaviors, and competencies.

Keywords: leadership, emotional intelligence, servant leadership, servant orientation, leadership competence, servant leadership scale.

During the past 40 plus years, servant leadership has received attention in the management literature (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Beck, 2014; Dannhauser & Boshoff, 2007; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Focht & Ponton, 2015; Greenleaf, 1998, 2002, 2003; Hirschy, Gomez, Patterson, and Winston, 2014; Hunter, Neubert, Perry, Witt, Penny, & Weinberger, 2013; Northouse, 2013; Russell & Stone, 2002; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008; Sokoll, 2014; Spears, 1998, 2003, 2009; van Dierendonck, 2011; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Parris and Peachey (2013, p. 377) concluded (in their systematic literature review (SLR) of 39 empirical studies), “servant leadership is a viable leadership theory that helps organizations and improves the well-being of followers.

One may ask, “How is servant leadership and transformational leadership, different?” Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2003) write that the primary difference is the leader's focus, while the transformational leader focuses on the organization to build employee commitment to achieve its goals; the servant leader focuses on the followers, with the “organizational objectives [as] a subordinate outcome” (para. 1). Allen, Moore, Moser, Neill, Sambamoorthi, and Bell, (2016) add that servant leadership “focuses on supporting and developing the individuals within an institution, while transformational leadership focuses on inspiring followers to work towards a common goal” (Abstract). Fox (2019) agrees with Stone, *et al.* and Allen, *et al.* on the leadership focus difference, but adds two further differences: (1) servant leadership focuses first on the “greater good” and then organizational priorities, while transformational leadership is first concerned about organizational priorities and (2) transformational leadership focuses on organizational goals and then equips and resources employees to reach those goals, while servant leadership focuses first on the employees' goals and then as a means to achieve organizational goals. Fox points out that the approaches are complementary.

But Allen, *et al.* conclude that servant leadership is to be preferred. Following is a discussion of the servant leader orientation, servant leadership traits and behaviors, emotional intelligence, and the presentation of an integrated servant leadership model.

Servant Leader Orientation

Greenleaf (2002, p. 21) argues that “the great leader is seen as servant first” or put another way, “the servant leader *is* servant first” (p. 27). Greenleaf goes on to note, “It [leadership] begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, *to serve first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (p. 27). Greenleaf labels his concept as servant leadership. Greenleaf (2003) drew his concept of the “servant leader” from Hermann Hesse’s *Journey to the East* (p. 248). Greenleaf goes on to assert that the true test of effectiveness for a servant leader is, “[T]o make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served...Do those served grow as persons?” (p. 27).

So, “What is it that motivates one to serve?” van Dierendonck & Patterson (2015, p. 120) posited “compassionate love” was the driving force behind the desire to serve.

Servant Leadership Traits and Behaviors

One may ask, “What are the traits and attributes of a servant leader?” van Dierendonck & Patterson (2015) identified four “virtuous traits: humility, gratitude, forgiveness, and altruism;” followed by core servant leadership behaviors: “empowerment, authenticity, stewardship, and providing direction.” Combined these produce “optimal human functioning, sense of community and meaningfulness.” Denis and Bocarnea (2005) in seeking to extend Patterson’s 2003 model of servant leadership (i.e., agapao love acts with humility, is altruistic, is visionary for the followers, is trusting, is serving, and empowers followers) identified five encompassing constructs: empowerment, love, humility, trust, and vision.

Greenleaf (2002, pp. 27-57, 262) offered 23 characteristics: “knows himself;” “focuses first on others’ priority needs;” “initiates action, provides ideas; provides structure, and takes risk;” “sets goals;” “listens to learn;” “links language to imagination;” “strategically withdraws to renew;” “shows acceptance and empathy;” “possesses intuition;” “has foresight;” “is aware and realistic;” “is persuasive;” “uses persuasive modeling;” “works step-by-step;” “conceptualizes;” “builds community;” “is moral;” “builds people first;” “possesses a quality inner life;” and “has great integrity.”

Sipe and Frick (1993, p.4-6), based on their study of 10 high-performing companies, argue that there are seven pillars of servant leadership: “person of character.” (demonstrates integrity, humility, and serves a higher purpose); “puts people first” (shows compassion, serves, and mentors); “skilled communicator” (is empathetic, receptive to feedback, and communicates persuasively); “compassionate collaborator” (says thank you, builds community, and mediates conflict); “has foresight” (is a visionary, creative, and action oriented); “systems thinker” (focuses on greater good, is adaptable, and easily accommodates complexity); and “leads with moral authority” (shares power, creates an accountable culture, shares responsibility) .

Yukl (2010, p. 420) adds, “altruism,” “humility,” “personal growth,” “fairness and justice,” and “empowerment” to servant leader attributes, which are implied throughout Greenleaf’s (2002) description of a servant leader (pp. 21-61). Spears (1998; 2003, pp. 16-19; 2009), in distilling Greenleaf’s writings (1998, 2002, 2003) identified 10 essential servant leader characteristics: listening... empathy... healing... awareness... persuasion... conceptualization... foresight... stewardship... commitment to the growth of people... [and] building community.” Spears admitted the list of ten attributes isn’t exhaustive. Focht and Ponton (2015, pp. 49-50) in a three stage Delphi study, whittled down a substantial list of attribute candidates to 12: “valuing people, humility, trust, caring, integrity, service, empowering, serving others’ needs before their own, collaboration, love/unconditional love, and learning.” These attributes were found to be consistent with prior research.

Using logical analysis, aligned in Table 1 are the Sipe and Frick (1993) attributes, those extracted by the authors from Greenleaf (2002), those of Yukl (2010) in {...} and Spears’ (2003) in [...]; in cases of overlap with those of Sipe and Frick or Greenleaf, Yukl’s and Spears’ attributes are not included. The Seven Pillars easily expand to incorporate Greenleaf’s, Yukl’s, and Spear’s servant leader characteristics, becoming a conceptually convenient taxonomy.

Table 1

Servant Leader Attributes/Behaviors

Sipe and Frick (1993)	Greenleaf (2002); Spear (2003); Yukl (2010)
Person of Character	Strategically Withdraws to Renew, Knows Himself, Elicits Trust, {Fairness and Justice}
Puts People First	Wants to First Serve, Builds People First, {Altruism, Humility}
Skilled Communicator	Listens to Learn, Links Language to Imagination, Shows Acceptance and Empathy, Is Persuasive
Compassionate Collaborator	Builds Community, Builds People First, Shows Acceptance and Empathy, Uses Persuasive Modeling, {Personal Growth, Empowerment}, [Listening, Healing]
Has Foresight	Possesses Intuition, Has Foresight, Aware and Realistic, Conceptualizes, Takes Risk, Sets Visionary Goals
Systems Thinker	Initiates Action, Sets Visionary Goals, Works Step-By-Step, Provides Ideas, Provides Structure, [Awareness]
Leads with Moral Authority	Uses Persuasive Modeling, Is Moral, Possesses a Quality Inner Life, Has Great Integrity, [Stewardship]

Russell & Stone (2002) argued that there are at least 20 attributes of servant leadership identified implicitly or explicitly by Greenleaf (1998, 2002, 2003); in turn, they offer a two-dimensional classification of servant leadership characteristics (Table 2) as either functional or “an accompanying attribute.” They define *functional* as “the operative qualities, characteristics, and distinctive features belonging to leaders and observed through specific leader behaviors in the workplace. The functional attributes are the effective of characteristics of servant leadership” (2002, “Introduction to Servant Leadership Theory”). They write, “The *accompanying attributes* appear to supplement and augment the functional attributes. They are not secondary in nature; rather, they are complementary and, in some cases, prerequisites to effective servant leadership” (2002, “Introduction to Servant Leadership Theory”). In their schema, the *accompanying attributes* act as moderating variables influencing the link between the leader’s values, core beliefs, principles, and the *functional attributes* (the true expression of servant leadership). Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) introduced the concepts of “being” and “doing” (p. 59), which appear to be similar to functional and accompanying attributes found in Table 2.

Table 2

The Russell & Stone Servant Leadership Model

Functional Attributes	Accompanying Attributes
Vision	Communication
Honesty	Credibility
Integrity	Competence
Trust	Stewardship
Service	Visibility
Modeling	Influence
Pioneering	Persuasion
Appreciation of Others	Listening
Empowerment	Encouragement
	Teaching
	Delegation

Van Dierendonck (2011) posits another conceptualization of servant leadership, consisting of six dimensions (Table 2): empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship.

Van Dierendonck(2011) goes on to identify three antecedents or preconditions for servant leadership to manifest itself: (a) motivation to become a servant leader, (b) enabling personal characteristics (self-determination/self-efficacy, high moral cognitive development, and tolerance or mastery of cognitive complexity) and (c) a national, local, or organizational culture, which is both humane and low in power distance (pp. 1243-1246). van Dierendonck argues that these antecedents must be measured in addition to servant leadership attributes. Beck (2014) identified two other antecedents: (1) leadership role tenure, i.e., longer service was more likely to produce servant leaders and (2) leaders volunteering at least one hour per week.

Outcomes of servant leadership according to van Dierendonck include: (a) a healthy servant leader/follower relationship, which should be characterized by mutual trust, respect, and mutual obligation (2011, p. 1246) and (b) a safe psychological climate, characterized by genuinely open and thorough communication, shared information, reasonable risk-taking, tolerance for failure (within prescribed limits), mutual learning and growth, fairness, organizational justice, and common displays of organizational citizenship behavior. van Dierendonck(2011, pp. 1248-1249) also argues that follower outcomes of servant leadership be measured; these include: the degree of follower self-actualization, positive job attitudes, and performance; these outcomes should be manifest at the individual and team level. What is unclear is the extent to which the servant leader influences followers or the extent to which he or she is influenced by them. It would be logical to assume that each influences the other; thus, it might be difficult to disentangle the individual effects. van Dierendonck acknowledges that the leader/follower relationship is reciprocal, which was admitted by Greenleaf (2002). An alternative or complementary perspective on van Dierendonck’s servant leadership consequences is to view them as contextual enabling variables which facilitate servant leadership and its effects on followers, individually or collectively and ultimately, the organization. However, the effect of servant leadership on organizational outcomes is an area in need of significant research attention.

Table 3
van Dierendonck (2011) Six-Dimensional Servant Leadership Model

Dimension	Definition
Empowering and Developing People	Empowerment enables followers to be self-confident and proactive in the discharge of their duties, effectively bestowing “personal power.” (pp. 1232-1233).
Humility	Servant leaders benefit from the experience and learning of others by seeking their contributions. Humility requires putting others first, facilitating superior performance, and providing needed support. A servant leader encourages others to take credit (honestly) for success (p. 1233).
Authenticity	The servant leader’s behavior is consistent with his/her core values and beliefs. He or she behaves and lives with integrity, consistent with his or her espoused moral code. Attributes include keeping one’s word, being visible within the organization and honesty (p. 1233).
Interpersonal Acceptance	Interpersonal acceptance is characterized by empathy, compassion, forgiveness, slowness to take offense, and tolerance. The environment created permits individuals to feel comfortable, and willing to take reasonable risks without fear of unfair retribution (p. 1233).
Providing Direction	The servant leader clearly communicates expectations, matches work responsibility to follower strengths, holds followers fairly accountable, emphasizes humane values and convictions in leader/follower relationships, and stimulates “out-of-the-box” problem solving (p. 1233).
Stewardship	The servant leader holds the organization and its

stakeholders in trust, to ensure present and future prosperity. The leader models desired values and behaviors, acting in the common interest (p. 1233).

In a similar research vein, van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) identified a cohesive eight-dimensional model, based on confirmatory factor analysis (standing back, forgiveness, courage, empowerment, accountability, authenticity, humility, and stewardship) which demonstrated both internal consistency reliability and criterion-related validity to well-being and performance. Green, Rodriguez, Wheeler, & Baggerly-Hinojosa (2015) provide summaries of six (6) instruments designed to measure servant leadership which served overlapping elements, but none of which explicitly addresses emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence

Barbuto, Gottfredson, and Serle (2014, p. 315), concluded “emotional intelligence is good predictor of a leader’s servant-leader ideology (or approach to leadership) but many not be a good predictor of servant-leader behaviors.” Emotional Intelligence demonstrates personal competence--self-awareness and self-management and social competence--social awareness and relationship management (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009, p. 24). Further, he or she is stress tolerant, exercises considered judgment, and is emotionally stable and mature.

An Integrated Servant Leadership Model

Any theory of servant leadership is likely to be somewhat contextually dependent, as suggested by Greenleaf (2002) when he describes his concept applied to four separate organizational types: business (pp. 147-175); education (pp. 175-214); foundations (pp. 215-230); and churches (pp. 231-261). The importance of context is further emphasized when Greenleaf describes institutions as servant leaders (pp. 62-103). Thus, a servant leadership theory may be fully, partially, or not at all applicable in a given context; but, by blending the Russell & Stone (2002) two-dimensional “functional” and “accompanying attribute” model with the Sendjaya & Sarros (2002) concepts of “being” and “doing,” along with the van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) “compassionate love and servant leadership conceptual model,” it may be possible to cluster relatively stable coreservant leadership attributes, with attendant behaviors which are valid across several cultural contexts or spheres.

Based on logical analysis, the servant leadership model in Table 4 and Figure 1 are offered. The three dimensions comprising the model are: servant leadership orientation, emotional intelligence, and leadership competence. Each dimension is defined by traits (“*Authentic Core Attributes*”) which are demonstrated through behaviors (“*Servant Leadership Behaviors*”), which impact followers (individuals and teams), organizations, and communities. All of these interactions take place within, the organization’s cultural contexts (Mouw, 2011, pp. 40-41). Due to these cultural contexts, an effective servant leader must lead and enable others to negotiate and live or work productively within the boundaries, roles, and expectations of each cultural sphere. Measurement is operationalized by the Servant Leadership Index (SLI) presented below.

Presented in Figure 1 is a graphic illustration depicting the interrelationships between a servant leadership orientation, emotional intelligence, and leadership competence. It is at the intersection of “Leadership Competence,” “Servant Orientation,” and “Emotional Intelligence” that highly effective servant leadership occurs. Figure 1, which is predicated on three (3) assumptions:

1. A Servant Leader is highly servant oriented (Servant Orientation). A servant leader demonstrates a desire/commitment to serve, shows concern for others, lives morally, is humane, seeks personal growth opportunities, possess a positive spiritual faith or life philosophy which is greater than oneself, and respects diversity.
2. A Servant Leader is highly emotionally intelligent. An emotionally intelligent servant leader demonstrates personal competence--self-awareness and self-management and social competence--social awareness and relationship management (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009, p. 24).
3. A Servant Leader competently applies contextualized leadership and management expertise, which includes being culturally competent; possessing foresight; being knowledgeable; empowering colleagues and others; building organizations and people; and practicing responsible stewardship.

Table 4
Authentic Core Servant Leadership Attributes and Behaviors

Authentic Core Attribute	Servant Leadership Behaviors
Servant Leadership Orientation	
Commitment to Serve	Decision to Serve, Service Tenure
Concern for Others	Altruism, Puts People First (i.e., Meets Others Priority Needs), Empathetic, Volunteers
Humane	Humility, Gratitude, Forgives, Patience, Compassion, Justice, Trusts Self and Others
Moral Seeker	Honesty, Integrity, Fairness, Ethical Behavior Accepts Feedback (i.e., Listens to Learn), Renews Him or Herself, Reflective, Internal Locus of Control
Spiritual Faith or Life Philosophy	Shows a belief in a higher power and/or cause or philosophy greater than oneself
Respects Diversity	Respects those who are dissimilar
Emotional Intelligence	
Self-Awareness	Aware of feelings, attitudes, and emotions
Self-Management	Expresses feelings, attitudes, and emotions constructively
Social Awareness	Aware of and honors the feelings, attitudes, and emotions of those about him or her
Relationship Management	Constructively manages his or her relationships
Leadership Competence	
Cultural Competence	Competently Negotiates Cultures & Spheres
Empowering	Models Enabling Behavior and Attitudes, Teaches, Mentors
Foresight	Vision, Risk-Taking or Pioneering, Aware and Realistic, Generates Ideas, Initiates Action
Responsible Stewardship	Wise Use of Human, Animal, Ecological, and Capital Resources; Practices Sustainability; Ensures Mutual Accountability
Knowledgeable (Cognitive)	Leadership, Management, Subject Area, and Technology Competence; Cognitive Complexity Comfort
Builder	Builds Community (i.e., Promotes the Common Good), Mediates Conflicts, Provides Structure and Processes, Shares Power, Communicates

Cultural Spheres

Cultural Spheres

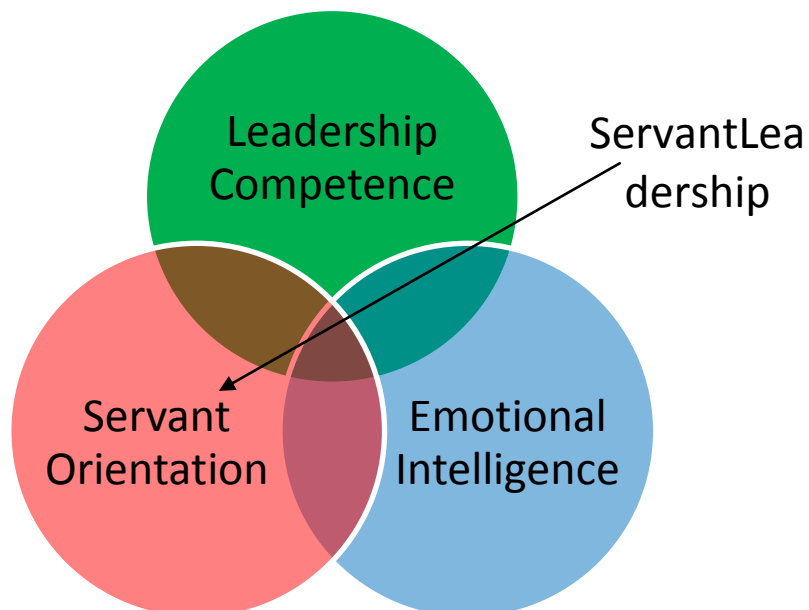


Figure 1 A Servant Leadership Model

Cultural Spheres

Servant Leadership Scale					
Please read each statement carefully. Circle the number that represents your usual behavior for that statement. When you have responded to each behavior, total your score. The interpretation is provided.					
Behavior	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. I chose to serve through leadership.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Concern for others motivates me.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I prefer to serve anonymously, unrecognized.	1	2	3	4	5
4. My leadership behavior is moral.	1	2	3	4	5
5. A leader, I embrace truth, & accept feedback.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I have faith or philosophy which guides me.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I respect diverse people & culture.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I am aware of my emotions.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I competently manage my emotions.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I am aware and respect the emotions of others.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I constructively manage my relationships.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I am effectively work within and with different cultures.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I empower peers and others around me.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I take reasonable risks to serve others	1	2	3	4	5
15. I am a responsible steward of that entrusted to me.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I competently meet my professional responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5
17. I build effective communities & teams to serve others.	1	2	3	4	5
Total Score					
Excellent Servant Leader: 77-85			Competent Servant Leader 60-67		
Proficient Servant Leader: 68-76			Aspiring Servant Leader: <59		

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