

Servant Leadership: Bridging Theory and Practice

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Abstract

The numerous theories, research, and books available provide evidence for the desire and interest to develop leaders. How best to develop leaders and build cultures of leadership remains a topic of our collective attention. Whether in the classroom or organizational setting, professional leadership experts need to be equipped with the most effective tools that yield the greatest results. This paper discusses not only on the empirical benefits of servant leadership, but also on practical means of creating supportive environments for developing servant leaders. Though other leadership approaches also offer valuable constructs, inherent to servant leadership is an emphasis on such foundational principles as community, commitment to the growth of others, stewardship, humility, and accountability—all important criteria for building cultures of leadership.

Key Words: Servant Leadership Theory, Teaching Leadership

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At some point in the career of most professionals, they have been in the presence of leaders who self-identify as individuals who practice servant leadership. This simple professed statement is often a core belief of the individual yet never quite explained or described in terms of what practicing as a servant leader looks like for them. For many, initial and subsequent writings by Robert Greenleaf in 2002 and 2003 informed their thoughts and they commenced using phrases such as serving your followers or putting followers first. However, further exploration of what or how exactly leaders operationalized service to followers is an image left for the listener to create. Relying on empirical data and foundational principles of servant leadership, this paper highlights furthering the understanding and practice of servant leadership by discussing what should be emphasized in teaching servant leadership, what techniques facilitate higher order thinking and application within learners, and what behaviors and practices can be implemented to foster and support the creation of servant leader cultures.

Background

Up until the mid-2000s, servant leadership was a popular philosophy but generally lacked a testable set of constructs. Although progress toward a more concrete definition occurred in 1998 with Spears's 10 aspects of servant leadership, an empirically valid and widely used instrument to test these attributes did not exist. In the 2000s, several researchers built on this notion of servant leadership and the work of other scholars to develop models and instruments that measure servant leadership. However, Green (2015), as well as Eva, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, and Liden (2019) have pointed to redundancy in the existing measurement scales designed to capture servant leadership. In his work, Green (2015) analyzed dimensions of

servant leadership provided by Spears (1998), Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008), Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora (2008), and van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). Additionally, Green (2015) summarized overlapping constructs from other popular leadership theories, as well as those that seem to be unique to the concept of servant leadership.

Table 1 provides elements found in popular models of servant leadership that seem to have construct redundancy with the full range model of leadership and authentic leadership.

Table 1

Elements of Servant Leadership Found in Other Popular Leadership Theories

Intellectual Stimulation (Full Range Model of Leadership)

Conceptual Skills (Liden et al., 2008)

Conceptualization (Spears, 1998)

Courage (to Think Differently) (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011)

Foresight (Spears, 1998)

Persuasion (Spears, 1998)

Persuasive Mapping (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006)

Wisdom (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006)

Individual Consideration (Full Range Model of Leadership)

Empathy (Spears, 1998)

Helping People Grow (Spears, 1998)

Helping Subordinates Grow and Succeed (Liden et al., 2008)

Interpersonal Acceptance (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011)

Listening (Spears, 1998)

Idealized Influence – Ethics (Full Range Model of Leadership)

Behaving Ethically (Liden et al., 2008)

Responsible Morality (Sendjaya et al., 2008)

Authenticity (Authentic Leadership)

Authentic Self (Sendjaya et al., 2008)

Authenticity (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011)

Awareness (Spears, 1998)

Note. The information in this table is from Green (2015, p. 284).

In contrast, Table 2, provides elements found in popular models of servant leadership that seem to have a degree of construct uniqueness compared to other models of leadership such as the full range model of leadership, task- and relationship-oriented behaviors based on Ohio State's original finding, or leader-member exchange theory.

Table 2

Elements of Servant Leadership Somewhat Unique from Other Popular Leadership Theories

Spirituality

- Altruistic Calling (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006)
- Covenantal Relationship (Sendjaya et al., 2008)
- Transcendental Spirituality (Sendjaya et al., 2008)

Altruism

- Putting Subordinates First (Liden et al., 2008)
- Voluntary Subordination (Sendjaya et al., 2008)
- Humility (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011)
- Standing Back (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011)

Healing

- Emotional Healing (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006)
- Emotional Healing (Liden et al., 2008)
- Healing (Spears, 1998)

Empowerment

- Empowering (Liden et al., 2008)
- Empowerment (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011)

Stewardship

- Accountability (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011)
- Organizational Stewardship (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006)
- Stewardship (Spears, 1998; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011)

Community

- Creating Value for the Community (Liden et al., 2008)
 - Community Building (Spears, 1998)
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Note. The information in this table is from Green (2015, p. 285).

Although there are questions of construct redundancy, Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, and Wu's (2016) meta-analysis provided some evidence of the degree to which servant leadership is related to several follower and workplace outcomes (see Table 3). Based on their systematic

review of servant leadership, Eva et al. (2019) found empirical support for the benefits of servant leadership at the individual, team, and organizational levels for a variety of desired outcomes. Eva et al. also noted that the emphasis servant leaders place on followers creates a culture of caring that can transcend to the customers and ultimately the shareholders, as well as the community at large. These results support a rationale that servant leadership should likely be taught by professional leadership educators in universities as well as in leadership consultancy programs and institutionally based human resource training programs.

Table 3
Meta-Analysis Results for Servant Leadership

Variable	<i>k</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Rho</i>
Trust in Manager	7	1,886	0.71
Job Satisfaction	11	2,671	0.66
Leader-Member Exchange	4	938	0.65
Organizational Commitment	11	2,424	0.55
Engagement	4	959	0.52
Transformational Leadership	5	774	0.52
Organizational Citizenship – Organization	4	765	0.44
Affective Commitment Relational Perceptions	5	1,436	0.41
Overall Organizational Citizenship	6	2,404	0.40
Organizational Citizenship – Individuals	5	1,674	0.35
Job Performance	8	2,077	0.23

Note. Data are from Hoch et al. (2016, p. 14). *k* – the number of effect sizes, *N* – total sample size, *Rho* = estimated true-score correlation.

What to Teach

When developing a training program for servant leadership, one way to envision an agenda is to begin with foundational leadership concepts: idealized influence, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and authentic leadership (see Figure 1). While these constructs are generally part of servant leadership, they are not unique to servant leadership. Once leadership trainees seem to understand aspects of both transformational and authentic

leadership, three unique areas could be taught—each with a different focus. These are shown in Figure 1 and outlined in detail in the sections that follow.

Follower Focus—Empowerment and Healing

Servant leadership contains a concept of helping followers to heal. This is a much stronger aspect of leadership than more traditional concepts of being considerate of followers' needs. Healing requires assisting followers to work through feelings of mistreatment that occurred under previous leaders. Coincident to healing is helping followers learn to feel empowered. Often, followers who need healing are more cautious in work environments. Efforts to avoid continued mistreatment often prevent followers from actively using any empowerment they are given. In servant leadership training, leaders should be taught basic listening and empowerment techniques to facilitate helping followers heal.

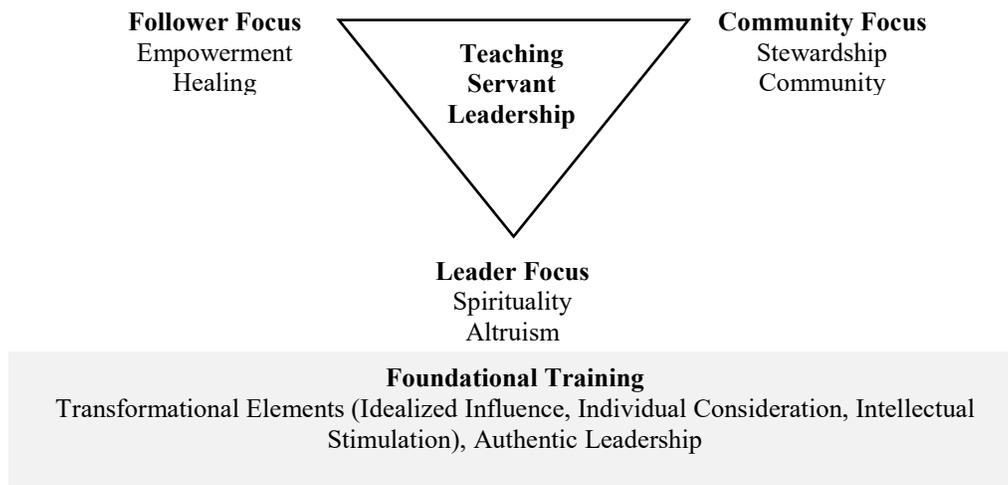


Figure 1
Teaching Servant Leadership

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Community Focus—Stewardship and Community. The aspects of developing community and being a steward of resources are generally unique to servant leadership. Popular theories with an empirical base of research tend to focus on individual follower performance. Servant leadership instead emphasizes developing a sense of community. This aspect of servant leadership training may include constructs of organizational culture, stages of team growth and development, and group conflict management skills. On the other hand, stewardship development is likely to coincide with some traditional “management” training such as the future value of money and budgets, project management, and cost-benefit analyses.

Leader Focus—Spirituality and Altruism. Altruism or “putting follower needs first” is perhaps one of the most widely used summative statements associated with servant leadership. Beyond this simple moniker, however, there are different theories of altruism. Developing altruistic skills may require integration with community focus concepts. Since “follower needs” will vary from individual to individual, learning to juxtapose altruism for many followers with the concurrent requirement to develop a strong community is a training challenge.

The idea of leader spirituality is unique in servant leadership. Theories such as transformational, authentic, and leader-member exchange do not contain an aspect of leader spirituality. For training purposes, it may be useful to differentiate between personal and workplace spirituality. Organizations vary a great deal on the degree to which policies allow workers to display or discuss any form of spirituality attached to a formal religion. Additionally, sometimes leader spirituality can be interpreted by some followers as a lack of action. Followers who tend to be task oriented may view a leader who contemplates larger spiritual implications of decision making as someone who is slow or unable to make a decision. Training leaders on how to engage their individual spirituality across a wide array of different followers is quite different than spiritual development training focused solely on individual spiritual growth.

Conclusion

As the understanding and appreciation for a servant leadership approach to the broader field of leadership continues to be evaluated and researched, evidence suggests added value to followers, organizations, and the larger community. Whether in the classroom or an organizational setting, individuals desirous of developing servant leaders and/or creating a servant leader culture are encouraged to foster psychologically safe environments where students

and followers are allowed space to heal and be empowered. Emphasizing the unique attributes of servant leadership, individuals should be challenged to consider the implications of being a steward to not only the physical resources entrusted to them but to the people—followers, stakeholders, and communities. Those involved in the development of servant leaders and cultures conducive to servant leadership should additionally be intentional and mindful as they seek ways to incorporate altruism and spirituality into their spheres of influence and communities. Ultimately, creating servant leader cultures requires leaders and educators who not only think of others first but are committed to modeling servant leadership behaviors and practices.

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