THE STATE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP THEORY: HISTORY, DIRECTION, AND BENEFITS

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Abstract

Servant leadership is a popular leadership theory pioneered by Robert K. Greenleaf in the 1970s. The theory has grown in popularity since its introduction. The theory is grounded in principles of the Christian Gospel. However, the application and impact of this theory has become international with practitioners coming from many different philosophical and religious backgrounds.

However, theories of servant leadership vary to some degree amongst the published research on the subject. Due to this disparity, many in management and leadership may not fully comprehend the elements that make up servant leadership. A key goal of this paper is to provide management professionals and students with a more uniform understanding of what servant-leadership theory entails.

Research has shown that there are many benefits that stem from the practice of servant leadership within organizations. Some of the benefits of servant leadership include self-efficacy, motivation to serve, motivation to lead, empowerment, cognitive learning ability, improved organizational citizenship behavior, enhanced job satisfaction among workers, improved customer service, and increased employee retention. The application of this leadership theory may well have growing relevance. Servant-leadership theory has a high degree of application to workers who fall under the age groupings of Millennials and Generation Y. Additionally, some managers may not fully understand how research has demonstrated the benefits of servant leadership for both organizations and individual employee performance.

The mission of this paper is to serve as a resource for both managers and students, helping them understand how scholarly literature describes servant leadership and reports its impact, based on a review of published scholarly literature. Additionally, this paper will discuss organizational practices that may limit the benefits of servant leadership. It is hoped that management practitioners will utilize this paper to better and more accurately apply servant leadership in their organizations.

Keywords

Introduction

One who journeys into the business section of any large bookstore is very likely to be confronted by several books on the topic of how to apply servant leadership to their organization. The term servant leadership is a commonly used one. It is all too often not well understood by managers and leaders. Recent research has shown that servant leadership tends to have a significant impact on younger members of the workforce. The study of servant leadership is highly relevant to the rising generation of employees in the workforce. Bennett (2023) found that workers who are members of the Millennial and Generation Y who have supervisors that practice servant leadership experience growth in their level of organizational commitment. This growth is attributed to servant leadership's emphasis on employee respect and wellbeing (p. 110).

Given the impact of servant leadership on younger workers and the overall positive benefits of these practices on organizations, managers and leaders need to understand the key elements of this theory. This paper is focused on defining for emerging managers and leaders what servant leadership is based on published research. Additionally, it is hoped that this article will be of help to students who in the process of learning about servant leadership.

History of Leadership Studies in General

The nature of leadership within organizations is a topic that is the subject of a great deal of debate and research. As far back as the classical Greeks, the nature of what good leadership is has been debated. Plato's work *The Republic* is mainly focused on the question of how one can create the ideal leader or ruler (Plato, 2000).

Plato saw good leadership as benefiting society as a whole. According to Plato's *The Republic*, the pursuit of a moral life, combined with education, creates the type of individuals, known as philosopher kings and queens, who are most effectively able to lead a society (Williamson, 2008; Plato, 2000).

Aristotle saw leadership as a product of developing good habits and character. Developing the habit of learning, and doing good acts gave one the character and the ability to lead well (Menaldo, 2009). Aristotle's view of leadership being related to character echoes that of the quality of the servant leader found in Spears (2010).

An important medieval philosopher, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), agreed with both Aristotle and Plato that the leader, in order to be effective, needed to have a moral grounding. Aquinas. For Aquinas, the moral and good leader needed to look after the interests of those they served rather than person ones (Turner, 2013).

Later philosophers largely concurred with Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas regarding the qualities needed for good leadership (Melchart, 2010). One example of a later philosopher in line with the classic view of leadership was John Locke. Locke valued learning and experience, just as his predecessors did. Locke also valued service. Locke said**,** "He that goes farthest out of the way, is thought fittest to lead, and is sure of most followers" (Locke, 2005, p. 28). For Locke service beyond one's own interest was an important quality of leadership (Foster, 2011, p. 95).

Modern philosophers, including Derrida, have stepped away from the view of leadership first exposed by Plato and carried forward for centuries. Derrida, and the deconstructionist view he embraces, seem to focus more on leadership being a product of authoritarian power structures. Concepts such as morality and virtue are washed away as being somewhat naïve notions of the past (Glendinning, 2011).

Locke, Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas all express many of the same leadership qualifications one would find in the study topic of this dissertation: servant-leadership. While servant-leadership was not defined until the 1970's the philosophical roots of the theory seem to fall back centuries to the history of human social thought (Trpompenaars and Voerman, 2009, p.6).

Leadership touches and impacts many organizational structures critical to human progress, including those in commerce and government (Barrow, 1977). Leadership is increasingly seen as an indispensable soft skill that is critical to the success of many different types of organizations today (Wong and Davey, 2007, p.2).

Many researchers are drawn into the study of leadership due to its power to improve the effectiveness of a wide range of impactful organizations. One could define leadership as the ability to motivate a group of individuals to achieve goals or objectives that promote the organization's wellbeing (Cyert, 2006; Paris and Peachey, 2013, p. 377).

In Banutu-Gomez and Banutu-Gomez (2007) provide examples of effective leadership in practice. These examples include motivating followers within the organization to adopt a vision of what can be accomplished, helping them find the path to achieve specific goals, and guiding an organization towards a new direction and set of objectives. Cyert (2007) finds that effective leaders can influence the members of an organization to work enthusiastically toward goals that benefit the common good.

There are many different leadership theories, and servant leadership is just one of them. According to Bass and Bass (2008), each of the major leadership theories attempts to understand and develop strategies that enable leaders to motivate and utilize human capital most effectively.

History of Servant Leadership

The concept of servant leadership is not a new one. The concept has roots dating back to the authorship of the New Testament of the Bible. The philosophies of religions other than Christianity,, including Confucianism and Taoism, have contributed to the foundation of the philosophy of servant leadership (Ebener and O'Connell, 2010, p. 318). An Enlightenment-era example of the basic concept of servant leadership being understood, at least to some degree, is the ruler of Prussia, Frederick II, who referred to himself as the "first servant of the state" in 1752 (Jacoby, 1969, p. 31).

To study servant leadership effectively, it is also crucial to understand how it manifests in the workplace. To fully understand a theory, it is essential to examine its development. The founder of the servant-leadership movement is generally considered to be Robert K. Greenleaf. A key landmark was the publication of his book *Servant Leadership* in 1977. The book helped propel a movement that began to take a different look at how leaders operate within organizations (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002, pp. 1-2; Van Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1230-1231).

Greenleaf developed the concept of servant leadership after reading a book called *"Journey to the East"* by Hermann Hesse (1956). The book tells the tale of a group of travelers who set out on a long journey (Crippen, 2005, p. 12). Among the company was a man named Leo. Leo seemed to be one of the least important members of the band. Leo handled all the menial tasks, which kept the party on track and allowed it to progress. Leo's simple acts of service also served to build cohesion within the party (Hesse, 1956).

However, Leo one day disappeared. While with the party, Leo seemed to play a relatively insignificant role. However, once Leo was gone, it was clear how important he had been to the group's success. Eventually, the travelers decide that they cannot continue with their journey (Hesse, 1956).

Eventually, the narrator reunites with Leo. At the reunion, they discover that Leo was the leader of the organization that sponsored the journey (Hesse, 1956). The book had a deep impact on Greenleaf and, subsequently, the field of leadership studies. The lesson Greenleaf learned from the story of Leo and travelers is that the one who serves the most is usually the true leader of the group (Crippen, 2005, p. 12).

Besides Heese (1956), Greenleaf was also influenced by his Quaker faith and upbringing. Quakers believe that all humans have a spark of the divine in them. The religion also teaches that service, modeled after Jesus Christ's life, is an important quality to cultivate (Frick, 2004, p. 126).

The Quaker faith is reflected in the practice of servant leadership. Service to others, integrity, honesty, and respect for all around oneself are cornerstone principles of servant leadership (Frick, 2004, pp. 126-127). Greenleaf saw servant leadership as an extension of his own Quaker beliefs. Greenleaf stated that organizations were "how you get things done" (Frick, 2004. p.129). By making better organizations, servant leadership could make the world a better place (Hill, 2013, pp. 17 – 18).

Generally, one could define servant leadership in brief as a leader prioritizing the needs and wellbeing of the followers over those of the organization. By prioritizing the needs of followers over those of the organization, not only will the individuals within the organization benefit, but the organization itself will also prosper to a greater degree (Gillet, Cartwright, and Vugt, 2011). For some in leadership,, it seems somewhat paradoxical that service to employees aids in the organization's success. However, this concept is a key principal of servant leadership theory (Ebener and O'Connell, 2010, pp. 317).

According to Ebener and O'Connell (2010), exemplifying the role of a good servant is a crucial aspect of the practice of servant leadership. Leaders help develop a culture of servant leadership in their organizations by visibly serving those who follow them. Additionally, the practice of servant leadership builds character in the leader, thereby enhancing their own abilities, which in turn have a positive impact on the organization (pp. 317-318).

Servant leadership also benefits the customer. When leaders help their employees enjoy a better quality of life in the workplace, the level of service given to customers improves. When the customer experience is enhanced, the organization enjoys a great level of success (Bayati et al., 2025). Research has also found that employees display higher levels of overall engagement, loyalty, ethical conduct, and organizational commitment when leadership employs servant leadership practices (Canavesi and Minelli, 2021, p. 414). Additionally, research has found that servant leadership also enhances valence among employees (Liu et al., 2024).

Servant leadership shares many similarities with other popular leadership theories, including ethical, transformational, and authentic leadership. However, servant leadership also offers some key differences from these other theories (Rivkin, Diestel, and Schmidt, 2014, p.55).

Transformational leadership, which at times is confused with servant leadership, differs from servant leadership in that "it fails to consider the importance of a moral compass" (Rivkin et al, 2014: Graham 1991).

According to Rivkin et al.al. (2014), servant leadership differs from theories that have a moral aspect, such as authentic leadership and ethical leadership. Unlike the two previously mentioned theories, "Servant leadership focuses on the success of the multiple stakeholders of the organization" (p. 55).

While servant leadership differs from other leadership theories, it may have drawn off other theories in its development. Xu et al. (2024) finds that servant leadership has developing off of both social information processing theory and social exchange theory. This barrowing of ideas from other theories is not unusual. Many leadership theories seem to be an evolution of earlier theories.

Another difference that exists between servant leadership and other theories is that servant leadership's focus is on the good of the followers. According to Smith, Montango, and Kuzmenko (2004), the servant leader has the key goal of developing the employees they lead and supporting their success. This is a departure from other leadership philosophies which focus on the success of the organization.

Wong and Davey (2007) stated that much of the philosophy of servant leadership is drawn directly from the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus Christ. One example of servant leadership principles expressed in the New Testament is as follows:

But Jesus calling them, saith to them: You know that they who seem to rule over the Gentiles, lord it over them: and their princes have power over them. But it is not so among you: but whosoever will be greater, shall be your minister. And whosoever will be first among you, shall be the servant of all. For the Son of man also is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a redemption for many (Mark 10: 42-45 Douay Rhiems Bible).

Defining Servant Leadership

Robert K. Greenleaf's 1977 essay on servant leader discussed many of the elements and concepts of the leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977). However, this founding essay on the topic did provide a clear definition of servant leadership (DeConinck et al. p.3. 2025). Since Greenleaf 1977 several leadership theorists have attempted to define the theory. Most of these definitions share many commonalities and have borrowed from each other. Many of the definitions focus on Robert K. Greenleaf and his successor, Larry C. Spears (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

According to Hale and Fields (2007), servant leadership can be described as "an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those lead over the self-interest of the leader, emphasizing leader behaviors that focus on follower development, and de-emphasizing glorification of the leader" (p. 397).

Other definitions of servant leadership also put service at the heart of the theory. One example is Boyatzis and McKee (2005), which finds that the central principle of servant-leadership is the leader setting aside their potential for personal gain in order to benefit the collective whole. Rivkin et al. (2014) stated, "Thus, servant leaders do not lead for their own or their organization's benefit, but for the benefit of multiple stakeholders, and especially their employees" (p.55).

Larry C. Spears, the current head of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center, is generally considered to be not only an important servant leadership scholar but also a key philosophical successor to Greenleaf (Van Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1231). Because of Spears' important role in the current state and prior development of servant-leadership theory, it is important to understand what he has said on the topic.

In an article by Spears (2010), we find a view of what some of the important aspects of his view of servant-leadership include. Like Aristotle, as discussed in Menaldo (2009), Spears (2010) views servant leadership as a part of personal character. According to Spears (2010), "Character refers to deep structures of personality that are particularly resistant to change" (p. 26).

Spears (2010), echoing his mentor Greenleaf, describes servant leadership in terms of service. The leader is, first and foremost, a servant who feels the desire and a natural sense of calling to serve. This desire is then followed by the conscious choice to aspire to be a leader.

Spears (2010) also stated that leadership is not an exclusive possession of the leader. Servant leaders seek the engagement of the opinions and talents of others in the decision-making process. Additionally, servant leaders are expected to possess a strong ethical sense in their decision-making processes. The welfare and needs of those being led are a primary concern of the leader. The concern a leader shows for the welfare and growth of their followers will enhance and benefit the organization in the long run.

Spears (2010) provides valuable insights into the nature and core of servant-leadership, also listing 10 common qualities, or core practices, found in practitioners of this theory. Those qualities include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (pp. 27-29).

It is worth noting that these 10 leadership qualities identified by Spears (2010) are an extension of the work Robert K. Greenleaf. Greenleaf spoke extensively on these servant leadership qualities in the latter years of life (Sipe and Frick, 2009). Additionally, it is essential to recognize that many leading researchers in the field of servant leadership widely accept the qualities mentioned in Spears (2010).

The list in Spears (2010) can aid managers and leaders by providing a list of qualities or practices to look for in successful organizations that practice servant leadership. Companies that practice servant leadership should have many of the qualities and practices mentioned in the list.

Each of the qualities of servant leadership listed by Spears (2010) adds much to organizations. Spears' list of qualities related to servant leadership has become commonly accepted in scholarly circles. Many servant leadership scholars have accepted and expanded upon the meaning of Spears (2010) list of servant leadership qualities (Crippen, 2005, pp.13-14).

Autry (2001), commented on listening, stating that this quality of servant leadership requires a commitment to and talent for listening to others. Bennis and Goldsmith (1997), regarding the quality of listening, add that a servant leader focuses on silently listening and reflecting upon what they are being told, both verbally and through various non-verbal cues.

Listing is an important leadership skill. Like Autry (2001) and Bennis and Goldsmith (1997), DePree (1989) adds that a servant leader's ability to listen well is tied not only to to being able to speak and write well but also to listening.

Regarding the quality of empathy identified by Spear (2010), Block (2013) stated, "It is a misuse of our power (as leaders) to take responsibility for solving problems that belong to others" (p. 72). Simply put, "A good servant-leader strives to understand and empathize with others. However, this understanding should be supportive rather than patronizing (Crippen, 2005, p. 13).

Healing is important because sickness or weakness in any person or aspect of an organization can be contagious (Crippen, 2005, p. 13). Spears (2010) defines the quality of healing as the skill of being able to heal others and oneself through a series of six stages of healing leadership. These six stages are described by Sturnick (1998) as follows: (1) coming to an honest realization that there is an issue with one's health, often this is triggered by a dangerous or catastrophic event; (2) a willingness and desire to make changes that will improve health; (3) being willing to be taught and able to seek advice from those who are knowledgeable, (4) a support system which may include an entire organization, or a single person able to help; (5) understanding of the internal weaknesses and strengths; and (6) a return of the service given by others via servant leadership.

Crippen (2005) stated that the quality of awareness, as described in Spears (1998) and also discussed in Spears (2010), is a "general awareness, especially a self-awareness" (p. 13). Crippen (2005) adds, "One develops awareness through self-reflection, through listening to what others tell us about ourselves, through being continually open to learning, and by making the connection from what we know and believe to what we say or do" (p. 13).

The skill of persuasion the servant leader possess is described by Crippen (2005) as, "The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance" (p. 13). Greenleaf (1998) describes the power of persuasion as follows:

> "One is persuaded, I believe, upon arrival at a feeling of rightness about a belief or action through one's own intuitive sense. One takes an intuitive step, from the closest approximation to the certainty to be reached by conscious logic (sometimes not very close), to that state in which one may say with conviction, "This is where I stand." The act of persuasion, as I limit the definition, would help order the logic and favor the intuitive step. And this takes time. The one being persuaded must take the intuitive step alone, untrammeled by coercion or stratagems. Both leader and follower respect the autonomy and integrity of the other and each allows and encourages the other to find hisor her own intuitive confirmation of the rightness of the belief or action" (p. 85).

Another of Spears (2010) qualities is conceptualization. Frick (2004), while discussing Robert K. Greenleaf's view on this quality of servant leadership, stated that:

> Conceptualizing is an ability that requires more than verbal skills. Greenleaf called it the prime talent. The conceptualizer has, "the ability to see the whole in the perspective of history – past and future – to state and adjust goals, to evaluate, to analyze, and to foresee contingencies a long way ahead… The conceptualizer, at his or her best, is a persuader and a relation builder (p. 342).

Another of the qualities listed in Spears (2010) is foresight. Crippen (2005) stated that is quality is, "This is the ability to foresee or know the likely outcome of the situation (p. 14)." Sipe and Frick (2009) stated that:

> Foresight is a practical strategy for making decisions and leading. In fact, Greenleaf said foresight is the only "lead" a leader has. Think about that. Why do we trust a person to be a leader? Usually it is because he or she appears to see a little further ahead. When a leader says, "Come, follow me," we respond because we trust both the person and the leader's vision of the future. In other words, we trust the leader's foresight"(p. 106).

Stewardship supports servant leadership and its principles of empowering followers to improve the organization. Regarding the relationship between stewardship and servant leadership, Daft (2014) stated that stewardship requires a shift in thinking regarding leadership. Leaders are curators and guardians of their organization's resources and mission and thus prioritize the long-term needs of the organization. In their role as stewards, leaders need to give followers the tools and ability to make decisions that allow carry out their mission as employees (p. 177).

An additional quality of leadership is having a commitment to the growth of people within the organization. Northouse (2013) discusses what this commitment looks like in practice, stating that servant leaders treat each follower as a unique person with high intrinsic value beyond their immediate, measurable value to the organization. Servant leaders strive to help each of their followers grow personally and professionally. This high degree of commitment by the leader can take several forms, including career development opportunities, skill development, employee involvement in decision-making, and seeking input from followers on a regular basis (pp. 222-223).

The final quality of leadership listed by Spears (2010) is community building. Trompenaars and Voerman (2009) noted that the atmosphere of an organization can change significantly, particularly in relation to community building and servant leadership. A transformation occurs when the workplace becomes more than just a loose collection of workers; it becomes a team dedicated to a shared mission and set of goals. The workplace becomes more than just a gathering of people seeking to make money. The workplace becomes a place where people want to be together and treat each other with kindness, professionalism, and respect (p. 32).

If we apply the principles of servant leadership, as described by Spears (2010), to organizations and leaders, one can quickly see that it is very possible that the creation of learning organizations could also be enhanced. Spears (2010) stresses that listening is one of the qualities servant leadership brings to an organization. Sakalas and Venskus (2007) stress that listening skills are critical to the development of learning organizations.

Parris and Peachey (2013) concur with Spears (2010) view of the qualities servant leadership helps to foster. Parris and Peachey (2013) stated that the focus of servant leadership is on service to others, including the notion that a key role of organizations should be to develop individuals who can lead themselves and contribute to society. To some degree, the popularity of servant leadership may be a response to the perception that the corporate world can be greedy, self-serving, and ethically void. Servant leadership may be seen as a way to enhance corporate responsibility to society as a whole and reinforce the commitment to an organization's employees.

Status of Scholarship Related to the Theory of Servant-Leadership

Servant-leadership, like many theories in general, is undergoing transition. Van Dierendonck (2011) stated that servant leadership can be somewhat difficult to define. However, there are many commonly held views of this leadership theory that reoccur in scholarly literature.

Parris and Peachey (2013) find that one of the reasons for the lack of definition of servant leadership, or scholarly research, may be related to the treatment of how this approach has been viewed by its proponents (p. 378). Greenleaf (2008), for example, viewed servant leadership as more of a way of life than a theory.

Greenleaf (1977) even we so far as to refer to servant leadership as "meant to be neither a scholarly treatise nor a how-to-do-it manual." This view of servant leadership as being a personal philosophy of behavior is also found in Covey (1992) and other popular works of servant leadership (Parris and Peachey, 2013, p. 378).

The founder of the now-popular servant-leadership movement is Robert K. Greenleaf. Greenleaf (2008) describes servant leadership as originating from within an individual who has a desire to lead. Greenleaf contrasts his theory of leadership with those who seek to lead merely to acquire material wealth and power.

Spears (2010) list of servant-leadership traits is further refined into a theory by Van Dierendonck (2011). Van Dierendonck (2011), much like Parris and Peachey (2013), attempts to present clear patterns and trends in servant-leadership theory.

Parris and Peachey (2013) also provide a unique tool in the form of a systematic literature review, which helps piece together a collection of literature that establishes the benefits of servant-leadership. Parris and Peachey (2013) stated that, "Through exploring existing empirical studies that investigating servant-leadership theory in organizational contexts, we provide evidence that servant-leadership is a tenable theory" (p. 378).

Parris and Peachey (2013) find that the literature on servant leadership is multidisciplinary. The discipline focus of the publications with scholarly articles on servant leadership includes education, psychology, business, leadership, recreation, ethics, and religion. Overall, this hodgepodge of disciplines has produced a sample of 11 quantitative, 27 qualitative, and one mixed-methods study regarding the impact of servant leadership on organizations. The "review illustrates that servant leadership is being explored quantitatively and qualitatively, and the topic has international appeal with studies being conducted in 11 counties" (pp. 382-383).

In short, Parris and Peachey's (2013) work is valuable for many reasons, one of those being that it exposes gaps within the literature related to servant leadership. One area of a gap in the literature is somewhat of a lack of study on the impact of servant-leadership within organizations in general (p. 378). Besides the gap, some of the empirical research related to servant leadership is of questionable scholarly quality (Parris and Peachey, 2013, p. 388). Because servant-leadership is still a relatively new area of study, there is a diversity of opinion regarding the nature of this theory and the qualities present in servant-leaders and their followers. However, the work of Greenleaf, and subsequently that of his successor Spears, forms much of the theoretical foundation of present-day servant-leadership theory (Van Dierendonck, 2011, pp. 1230-1232).

Concurring with other researchers in the field of servant leadership, Stone and Russell (2002) identified many of the same attributes in their research on important leadership qualities as found in Spears (2010). Stone and Russell (2002) listed the following qualities: vision, influence, trust, respect, and willingness to share risk with those they lead. Additionally, servant-leaders gain influence and trust from the non-traditional source of the service they render to those they lead. Bass (2000), like Stone and Russell (2002), Spears (2010), and Sendjaya (2003), finds that the servant-leader is inspirational, influential, aware, a healer, and focused on "individual consideration" (p. 33).

It is hard to find any major scholars in the area of servant-leadership who disagree with the basic notions laid down by Greenleaf or his successor, Spears, regarding the fundamental tenets of the theory. Spears (2010), Bass (2000), Spears (2005), Sendjaya (2003), and Stone and Russell (2002) all share a similar view on the attributes a good servant-leader holds. Given the similarity between these respected servant-leadership scholars, the ten elements of servant-leadership identified by Spears (2005) well can be used as a model for the qualities one should expect to find in a servant leader.

Van Dierendonck (2011) differentiates servant leadership from other leadership theories, pointing out that most other leadership theories have a primary focus and allegiance to the organization. Servant leadership, on the other hand, is focused on the betterment of the follower. One leadership theory that has similarities to servant-leadership is leader-member exchange (LMX). The similarity occurs largely because of the close relationship between follower and leader, and the focus on bettering followers (Van Dierendonck 2011. pp. 1246-1247).

Not all scholars are enthusiastic with regard to servant leadership. Johnson (2001) finds servant leadership to be too naïve and idealistic to be a workable theory. Bowie (2000) is critical of servant

leadership because it is based on an unrealistic assessment of human behavior and lacks applicability to all situations, one being the military. However, despite , criticism, servant leadership seems to have a loyal and growing following (Van Dierendonck, 2011; Paris & Peachey, 2013).

Expected Outcomes of Servant- Leadership

An important benefit of servant leadership is the ability of the servant-leader to teach and transmit their abilities and talents to those who follow them. (Greenleaf and Spears, 2002, p. 277). Prior research into servant-leadership practices has shown that much of the teaching and learning. Servant leadership helps develop personal one-on-one leader-follower learning, which is important for the development of staff and the enhancement of overall performance within the business unit (McNeill, 2013).

The people-focused nature of servant leadership provides numerous benefits to individuals and their organizations. Rivkin et al. (2014) stated, "Recent research provides strong support for the idea that servant leadership exerts unique beneficial effects on various job attitudes, fairness perceptions, and not least, job performance (p.55). Follower empowerment and cognitive learning ability may also be enhanced (Du et al., 2024). In sales organizations a reduction in employee turnover, and improved customer service can be other outcomes that can be a product of servant leadership (DeConinck et al., p.14, 2025).

Impact of servant leadership on customers is not just limited to customer service. Servant leadership can impact how a brand is perceived. Setiawan et al. (2022) found that brand image and personality in the minds of customers can be enhanced for those companies that engage in servant leadership practices.

Amah (2018) finds that there are several positive impacts of organizations adopting servant leadership on organizations and the individuals who make them up. The benefits include self-efficacy, motivation-to-serve, motivation-to-lead, improved organizational citizenship behavior, and enhanced job satisfaction among workers.

Xu et al. (2024) finds that servant leadership enhances performance of workers by enhancing their work/life balance. Workers who have happier lives perform better in their jobs. Beyond the organization, it seems servant leadership may contain psychological benefits for the worker, and their families.

Ehrhart (2004) finds that employees of organizations where servant leadership is practiced experience many positive effects that are beneficial to their employers. These effects include higher levels of job satisfaction and commitment to the organization, stronger employee feelings of fairness and justice on the part of their employer, and a greater sense of supervisor support among employees.

Van Dierendonck (2011) provides another useful tool. This article presents a model and diagram that illustrate how servant leadership interacts with followers within an organization. The model heavily utilizes Spears's (2010) ten characteristics of leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1233).

Van Dierendonck (2011) lists what some of the expected outcomes are related to followers and organizations that have been engaged in the servant-leadership process. Among followers, one should find improved learning and knowledge retention. Additionally, one can expect to find improved performance, accompanied by increased awareness and commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Van Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1250). Employees in prior research have reported higher levels of self-actualization, health, knowledge, wisdom, positive job attitudes, self-autonomy, and a greater desire and ability to become leaders in their own right (Van Dierendonck, 2011, pp. 1248-1250).

The process of implementing servant leadership can be frustrated at times. Lower and middle level managers in large companies who engage in servant leadership practices may find that senior management may be a barrier to reaching the full benefits of this leadership theory. Policies and procedures in large bureaucratic organizations can additionally be a barrier to the full implementation of servant leadership (Song et al., 2025). Additionally, leaders who practice a passive leadership style may also impede the impact of servant leadership (Kina, 2024).

Conclusion

Servant leadership is a leadership theory that, when applied, can have numerous positive impacts on organizations, employees, and customers. Definitions of what constitutes servant leadership theory vary; however, most of the literature shares common elements and perspectives. Some of the benefits to a company's workforce include higher levels of positive attitudes, cognitive learning ability, effective customer service, and empowerment. By understanding the elements of servant leadership, managers are

better able to apply the principles of the theory to a better degree. An understanding of the impact of servant leadership on organizations and their stakeholders allows managers to appreciate the benefits of this theory more fully.

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