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Servant Leadership and Follower Need Satisfaction: Where Do We Go From Here?

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Given the fallout from the global financial crisis and the plethora of corporate scandals around the world in the past decade, many citizens are fed up with organizational leaders who they perceive to be corrupt. Perhaps as a response to public sentiment, many organizational scholars have started developing and examining leadership that has an ethical component (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Brown and Treviño, 2006; Northouse, 2001; van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2007). One leadership style – servant leadership – has been the subject of several theoretical and empirical articles as of late and, of course, is the focus of this entire book. Servant leadership is distinct from related styles of leadership, as the leader is viewed as a ‘servant’ to help satisfy the needs of his or her followers (Graham, 1991; Greenleaf, 1970, 1977). At a time in history when business leaders have damaged reputations and are overwhelmingly thought of as selfish and greedy, the increased interest in servant leadership is refreshing, relevant, and important.

In this chapter, I have three primary objectives. First, in an effort to highlight what is unique about servant leadership, I briefly review seminal and recent works on servant leadership to demonstrate the explicit focus on follower needs. This is important, because it helps to distinguish servant leadership from related constructs. Second, I present a theoretical model with need satisfaction as a mediator of the relationship between servant leadership and follower attitudes and behaviours. I succinctly walk through the model identifying the key linkages. Third, I provide several recommendations for future research on servant leadership. I am encouraged that some recent articles have been published in excellent journals (for example, Ehrhart, 2004; Neubert *et al.*, 2008), and I provide some suggestions to increase the rigour and visibility of

work on servant leadership so that it can thrive as a mainstream leadership construct in the management literature.

Servant leadership and follower needs

There are several leadership constructs that have an ethical component: charismatic leadership, ethical leadership, spiritual leadership, fair leadership, and authentic leadership (see Avolio *et al.*, 2009, for a review). Although there are many commonalities between these leadership styles and servant leadership, I argue that there is one key aspect of servant leadership that is unique – the explicit focus on and concern for follower needs. This unequivocal focus on follower needs and follower personal and professional development separates servant leadership from these related forms of leadership. This focus on follower needs is articulated by several prominent authors on servant leadership. For example, Greenleaf (1970), who introduced the concept of servant leadership approximately four decades ago, was adamant about this focus on follower needs. His statement on the topic was clear and concise: to be a servant-leader one must, ‘first make sure that other people’s highest priority *needs* are being served’ (Greenleaf, 1970: p. 4). Clearly, from the outset, a concern for meeting follower needs was a central aspect of the servant leadership construct.

Other scholars have followed suit. For example, in her influential theoretical piece on servant leadership, Graham (1991) notes that servant-leaders are ‘sensitive to the needs and desires of all organizational stakeholders’ (p. 117). Clearly, Graham emphasizes that servant-leaders are concerned with whether their followers’ needs are being met.

In addition, some recent articles have emphasized the connection between servant leadership and follower needs. For example, Matteson and Irving (2006) stated that, ‘servant leadership is essentially focused on placing the *needs* of followers before personal interests’ (p. 36). Similarly, Liden *et al.* (2008: p. 162) state that servant-leaders strive to ‘develop employees to their fullest potential’. Such development highlights the concern for employees’ personal and professional needs for growth. Finally, the primary focus of the work by Mayer *et al.* (2008) was the empirical linking of servant leadership and follower need satisfaction.

The theoretical and empirical work noted above shares a common theme: servant leadership is about satisfying the needs of followers. Whereas other leadership styles have ethical components, servant leadership is the only theory with this explicit focus on follower needs and,

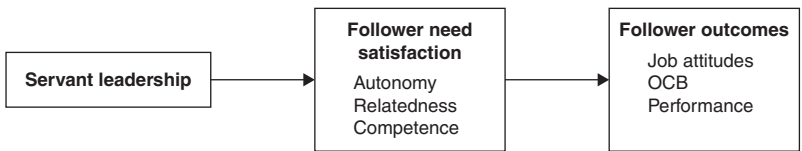


Figure 12.1 Theoretical model of servant leadership and follower need satisfaction

by extension, the development and growth of the follower. Given this link, in the next section I present a theoretical model (see Figure 12.1) that may be useful for empirically linking servant leadership to follower need satisfaction, and the positive outcomes that stem from having one's needs satisfied.

A theoretical model linking servant leadership and follower need satisfaction

Although theory has heralded servant leadership as a form of leadership with an explicit focus on follower needs, there is a surprisingly small amount of empirical research that has explored whether servant-leaders do, in fact, satisfy their followers' basic needs and, ultimately, whether this need satisfaction translates into positive job attitudes and behaviours (see Mayer *et al.*, 2008, for an exception). Given the fundamental role of follower needs in the servant leadership construct, I argue that:

- this link should be made explicit in empirical research
- need satisfaction will mediate the relationship between servant leadership and several positive work-related attitudes and behaviours.

In what follows, I briefly describe the links in the theoretical model presented in Figure 12.1. This model is not meant to be exhaustive but, rather, an initial foray to stimulate thought and future research linking servant leadership to follower outcomes through follower need satisfaction.

Servant leadership to need satisfaction

As highlighted earlier, a hallmark of servant leadership is the focus on follower needs. There is an extensive literature in social psychology examining different types of basic human need. Perhaps the most well-established needs-based theory of motivation is self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 1985). SDT defines needs as 'innate psychological nutriment that are essential for ongoing psychological

growth, integrity and well-being' (Deci and Ryan, 2000: p. 229). Three basic needs comprise SDT:

- autonomy – feeling in control of one's environment
- competence – feeling confident and capable
- relatedness – feeling connected to others.

A premise of SDT is that satisfying these three basic human needs is critical for developing a positive sense of subjective well-being, and that an inability to satisfy these needs leads to dysfunctional attitudes and behaviour.

Servant-leaders should be able to help satisfy these three basic human needs at work. In terms of *autonomy*, servant-leaders are not micro managers. These leaders are interested in the development of their followers and give them space to grow on their own. Because servant-leaders want to see their followers thrive and develop as autonomous individuals, they provide space to allow their followers to do their job. In terms of *competence*, servant-leaders want to see their followers develop a sense of confidence and mastery over their work. By providing autonomy, servant-leaders communicate that they have faith in their followers to do a good job, and this belief in the ability of followers is likely to translate into an increased sense of competence. In terms of *relatedness*, servant-leaders make it explicit to followers that they are interested in helping them grow, develop, and succeed. This support is likely to make employees feel more connected to their leader and work group, and to feel valued; it also creates a sense of belonging at work. Thus, servant-leaders, with their focus on follower needs and development, should help satisfy these three basic human needs.

Need satisfaction to job attitudes and behaviour

The second part of the proposed theoretical model focuses on the link between need satisfaction, and employee attitudes and behaviour. In an effort to understand how servant leadership impacts follower outcomes that have implications for organizational performance, it is important to examine how need satisfaction relates to these valued outcomes.

Perhaps the most commonly studied job attitude is job satisfaction. Although the link between job satisfaction and performance has been purported to be small, in recent years there has been mounting support for a substantial relationship between job satisfaction and job performance (Harrison *et al.*, 2006). Several theories of job satisfaction highlight

the importance of basic need satisfaction. As an example, Herzberg's two-factor theory of job satisfaction highlights two categories of factors that influence satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with one's job (Herzberg *et al.*, 1959). Herzberg *et al.* suggest that job satisfaction is caused by motivators (for example, achievement, recognition, advancement, responsibility), whereas job dissatisfaction is caused by hygiene factors (for example, pay, working conditions, peer relations). It is critical to note that motivation and hygiene factors are expected to influence job satisfaction because these factors influence the satisfaction of basic human needs such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness as described by SDT.

Another theory that links basic need satisfaction and job satisfaction is the job characteristics model (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). The job characteristics model suggests that jobs are more intrinsically motivating for employees when they are high in variety (for example, using many skills and talents), identity (for example, working on all aspects of a piece of work), significance (for example, impacting others' lives), autonomy (for example, performing job duties freely), and feedback (for example, receiving information about expectations and performance requirements). These job characteristics are expected to influence employee's fundamental human needs such as autonomy and competence, which ultimately influence motivation and job satisfaction. Meta-analyses have linked the job characteristics model to job satisfaction (Fried and Ferris, 1987; Loher *et al.*, 1985).

In addition to job satisfaction, the satisfaction of basic needs can also improve commitment to the supervisor and the organization. Consistent with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), when employees have their needs taken care of by servant-leaders, they are likely to feel a sense of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) to behave in ways that are beneficial to the supervisor. Thus, given that one's needs are satisfied, a follower will probably remain committed to the supervisor and organization.

Social exchange theory is also a useful lens with which to understand the link between need satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and task performance. When employees are given freedom to do their jobs, instilled with trust from their leader, and provided support, they will probably feel obligated to engage in behaviours that support their leader. Given that leaders try to motivate their employees to reach group goals and objectives, employees who have their needs satisfied by the leader recognize the importance of the group's success to the leader and therefore engage in behaviours that help the group perform well. These behaviours include going above and beyond what is prescribed in

one's job duties, and performing well at core aspects of one's job. Thus, need satisfaction should improve followers' OCB and performance.

In sum, the proposed theoretical model links servant-leadership to favourable follower job attitudes and behaviour through the mechanism of follower need satisfaction. Although the model is not exhaustive, it highlights an important mechanism for understanding servant leadership effects – a mechanism that is at the core of the concept of servant leadership: the satisfaction of follower needs. In what follows, I provide some suggestions for testing this model, as well as other avenues for future research.

Future directions for servant leadership research

Although there is considerable interest in servant leadership, it has yet to develop into a mainstream management construct, with articles regularly being published in the top management journals. I believe that servant leadership shows much promise as a construct, and that there is an important place for this form of leadership within the leadership literature. The explicit focus on follower needs provides a unique theoretical perspective on leadership that I believe can benefit the organizational literature. In an effort to see servant leadership continue to garner interest and attain status in the most prominent journals, I provide some suggestions for how to help this area of inquiry thrive.

Test and extend proposed theoretical model

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I believe that testing the model I propose in this chapter would be useful on many fronts. First, it would highlight what is truly unique about servant leadership: a focus on follower needs. Second, it could empirically establish that the theoretical link between servant leadership and follower needs is, in fact, perceived by followers. Third, by linking servant leadership to valuable follower outcomes (through follower need satisfaction), this area of inquiry will have some practical value that managers will be unable to ignore. Indeed, by linking servant leadership to outcomes, organizations and managers desire for successful and beneficial outcomes will undoubtedly increase interest in servant leadership.

Also, rather than focusing solely on need satisfaction as a mediator, it would be useful to explore alternative mechanisms, such as social exchange and social identity processes. It would be a wonderful next step to include these multiple mechanisms in the same study to determine which mechanism(s) serve to underlie servant leadership effects.

Empirical demonstration of the distinctiveness of the construct

In an effort to gain legitimacy, it is critical that servant leadership be empirically distinct from related constructs. Theoretically, I tried to make the case that there are differences between servant leadership and other related constructs. However, this case also must be made empirically. There are two important approaches to demonstrating the distinctiveness of servant leadership. First, it is important, using factor analysis, to show that servant leadership is distinct from related constructs. Second, it is critical to demonstrate that servant leadership explains unique variance in valued outcomes above and beyond related leadership constructs. If scholars are able to highlight the fact that servant leadership is unique in these ways, this affords the opportunity to make an important contribution to the leadership literature.

Measurement of servant leadership

Several different measures of servant leadership have been utilized. For example, some have used the measure developed by Ehrhart (2004), which is uni-dimensional and contains 14 items (Mayer *et al.*, 2008; Neubert *et al.*, 2008). Recently, new measures have been developed. For example, Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) developed a measure that empirically supports a five-dimensional framework. Chapter 14 describes an instrument that builds on Patterson's (2003) theoretical framework. In addition, Liden *et al.* (2008) created a measure of servant leadership and found evidence of a seven-factor operationalization. Most recently, Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (in press) developed an eight-dimensional measure (see also Chapter 13). It is important for scholars interested in servant leadership to come together to agree on a single measure of servant leadership. When there is a generally accepted measure, scholars can seek to tackle the first two issues mentioned: the empirical linking of servant leadership with follower need satisfaction and valued outcomes while controlling for related types of leadership.

Examine boundary conditions

The model presented in Figure 12.1 is purposefully simple and under-specified. However, future work that examines contingencies of the links in the model would be interesting. For example: What individual differences or contextual variables moderate the relationship between servant leadership and need satisfaction? What individual differences or contextual variables moderate servant leadership to the outcomes of interest? In this respect, the suggestions made in Chapter 8 could

be valuable. Such nuances would provide a beneficial extension of the servant leadership literature. There is scant research that has examined boundary conditions of servant leadership effects; such research would be a boon both theoretically and practically.

Incorporating multilevel models

One trend in the leadership literature is to test leadership using multilevel models (Avolio *et al.*, 2009). It would be interesting, for example, to examine whether employees generally have a shared perception of servant leadership (Ehrhart, 2004). In addition, it would be intriguing to explore cross-level moderators to examine whether aspects of the work context moderate the relationship between servant leadership, and individual-level attitudes and behaviours. By incorporating multilevel models, this literature could be enriched, and provide an opportunity to make a theoretical and empirical contribution.

Conclusion

With the increased distrust of corporate leaders in society, it is refreshing to focus on a form of leadership that is the antithesis of self-interest and greed. Indeed, servant leadership is an other-focused form of leadership that is concerned with the needs and development of followers. In this chapter, I have explicitly made the link between servant leadership and follower needs, presented a theoretical model illustrating this connection, and provided several recommendations for future work on servant leadership. The focus on servant leadership is timely, and will probably be well-regarded; however, research must have the requisite scientific rigour in order to be published in top journals, thereby affording this field the opportunity to gain legitimacy within the mainstream management literature.