

Research Highlights

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One of the most exciting aspects of the servant leadership movement today is the new research on servant leadership that is being conducted by scholars. An excellent summary can be found in *Inspiration for Servant-Leaders: Lessons from Fifty Years of Research and Practice* (2020).

The book includes a chapter by Haoying Xu, Meng Zhong, and Robert C. Liden titled “The State of the Art in Academic Servant Leadership Research: A Systematic Review.” To download a copy of the references that the authors used in that chapter, **click here**.

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340038770_The_state_of_the_art_in_academic_servant_leadership_research_A_systematic_review)

Dr. Liden is a leading scholar in servant leadership research. In 2017, he and his colleague, Meng Zhong, generously provided the following “Highlights of Scientific Research on Servant Leadership” for use by students and others who are interested in rigorous empirical research on the nature and impact of servant leadership.

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Although preceding the most popular contemporary leadership theories, servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) has received relatively less attention in the academic literature than other approaches to leadership (Liden, Panaccio, Meuser, Hu, & Wayne, 2014; Yukl, 2010). With few exceptions, such as Jill Graham’s (1991) theoretical exploration that introduced servant leadership to academic researchers, scientific research on servant leadership did not begin in earnest until Mark Ehrhart’s empirical research was published in 2004. Using a short measure of servant leadership that he developed in his 2004 study, Ehrhart found that servant leadership explained variance in team organizational citizenship behaviors (i.e. discretionary behaviors not required of employees), beyond the variance explained by the two dominant approaches to leadership, transformational leadership and leader-member exchange (LMX). His research demonstrated that servant leader behaviors were related to organizational justice (fairness in decisions made regarding employees), which in turn led employees to reciprocate by engaging in organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs).

Using Ehrhart’s (2004) measure, Walumbwa, Hartnell, and Oke (2010) replicated the positive relationship between servant leadership and OCBs. These researchers found that servant leadership encouraged OCBs by enhancing self-efficacy (people’s self-confidence in their ability to

perform specific tasks well), creating a service climate at work, and establishing a fair workplace. Empirical research has also revealed that employees of servant leaders are more creative than those working with leaders who scored lower on servant leadership (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014; Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008; Neubert, Hunter, & Tolentino, 2016).

Furthermore, servant leadership has been shown to be positively related to follower affective commitment (LaPoint & Vandenberghe, 2016; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008) job satisfaction (Mayer, Bardes, & Piccolo, 2008) and psychological contract fulfillment (Panaccio, Henderson, Liden, Wayne, & Cao, 2015). Furthermore, Van Dierendonck, Stam, Boersma, Windt, and Alkema (2014) provided evidence from both a laboratory experiment and field study that servant leadership positively affects organizational commitment and work engagement by satisfying followers' needs. Interestingly, within a hospital setting, Neubert and colleagues (2016) found that servant leadership of nurse managers was positively related to patient satisfaction through nurse job satisfaction.

Following Ehrhart's (2004) seminal empirical work, Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008) developed a more comprehensive and psychometrically sound measure of servant leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011). They identified seven key dimensions of servant leadership: behaving ethically, emotional healing, putting subordinates first, helping subordinates grow and succeed, empowering, creating value for the community, and conceptual skills. With their newly created measure of servant leadership, these researchers found servant leadership to explain variability in employee commitment to the organization, job performance, and community citizenship behavior, even when statistically controlling the influence of transformational leadership and leader-member exchange (or LMX, which captures the quality of relationships between leader and follower). Whereas transformational leaders are seen as putting their organization's needs first and encouraging employees to sacrifice their own interests to meet the goals of the organization (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006), servant leaders prioritize the needs of followers (Greenleaf, 1970; Liden et al., 2008).

Furthermore, a corresponding short version of the measure was then developed showing high consistent reliability and validity with the original full measure (Liden, Wayne, Meuser, Hu, Wu, & Liao, 2015). Using the measures developed by Liden and colleagues (2008, 2015), researchers demonstrated that servant leadership positively affects servant employees' self-efficacy and group identification, which in turn lead to their service performance (Chen, Zhu, & Zhou, 2015). In addition, servant leadership has been shown to positively predict employee needs of autonomy, competency and relatedness, which then leads to employees' in-role and extra-role performance at work (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016). Newman, Schwarz, Cooper, & Sendjaya, in press) demonstrated that servant leadership relationships with extra-role or citizenship behaviors are stronger for proactive employees.

Finally, providing further support for the incremental validity of servant leadership over transformational leadership, as well as authentic and ethical leadership, meta-analytical evidence showed that servant leadership on average explains 12% more variance in employee overall outcomes beyond that explained by transformational leadership (Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, & Wu, 2016). This meta-analysis was based almost exclusively on research conducted using an overall/global measure of servant leadership, combining all servant leadership dimensions. Two studies in which servant leadership dimensions were studied independently include Liden and colleagues (2008) and Sousa and Van Dierendonck (2016). For example, it was reported in the latter study that follower engagement is maximized when the servant leader exhibits humility and at the same time actively empowers followers.

Following Ehrhart's study, which focused on servant leadership at the team level (i.e., team member perceptions of the leader's servant leadership behavior were aggregated to the team level), additional research has now been conducted at the team level. Schaubroeck, Lam, and Peng (2011) found servant leadership at the team level is related to team performance, explaining an additional 10% of the variation in team performance beyond that explained by transformational leadership. Schaubroeck and his colleagues, using the Liden et al. (2008) servant leadership measure, demonstrated that servant leadership led to team performance through its positive influence on affect-based trust, which was shown to provide psychological safety to team members. When employees feel psychologically safe, they are willing to take risks associated with being creative, are willing to challenge the status quo (which leads to better decision making), and are motivated to perform well as a way of reciprocating for fair treatment by the leader. Another team level study found servant leadership to be positively related to team potency (team confidence in its ability to perform well) and subsequent team performance (Hu & Liden, 2011). A noteworthy finding of the Hu and Liden investigation is that servant leadership was shown to positively influence the relationship between goal clarity and team potency. Not only did the findings show that goal clarity was more positively related to team potency the more servant leadership was present, it was also discovered that teams that did not have a servant leader had lower potency and lower subsequent performance the clearer their goals! Evidently, without the support of a servant leader, team members found it frustrating to completely understand the goal, but not receive the leader support needed to successfully meet the goal.

Furthermore, scholars have found that servant leadership can contribute to a service climate of the team, which benefits team performance. In the study of Hunter, Neubert, Perry, Witt, Penny, and Weinberger (2013), service climate in a retail store was found to mediate the effects of servant leadership on store employees' sales behaviors, organizational citizenship behaviors, and turnover intentions. The study also identified two critical personality traits as the predictors for servant leadership, such that leaders who are more agreeable or less extravert exhibit more servant leadership behaviors. Lastly, findings of a team-level study by Liden, Wayne and colleagues (2014) suggested that servant leaders can enhance employees' servant behaviors by creating a serving culture, which leads to high store performance, especially as measured by

customer satisfaction. Also, the serving culture was found to strengthen the employees' individual identification with the group, which in turn leads to high in-role performance, creativity, and customer service, and low turnover intentions.

A unique study by Peterson and her colleagues (2012) investigated servant leadership at the organizational level using a 16-item version of Liden and colleagues' (2008) measure of servant leadership. Specifically, these researchers found that company performance, as measured by return on assets, was higher in companies led by CEOs who engaged in servant leadership. Interestingly, CEOs who had founded the company and those who scored lower on the personality characteristic, narcissism, were found to be significantly more likely to engage in servant leadership. The negative relationship between leader narcissism and servant leadership is consistent with Greenleaf's (1970) contention that leaders should help others before providing for themselves.

Servant leaders gain team member trust and build long-term relationships by showing genuine concern for all team members (Liden et al., 2008). And because it is the leader's team, follower trust in leadership acts to elevate team members' trust in the capabilities of their team to be effective. Second, given the complexity of modern work environments, many potential changes and unexpected problems arise that require team members' collaboration to solve. Servant leaders, who are fair, and honest with team members, promote open and problem-driven communication within the team, resulting in enhanced team member confidence in their team's capabilities to be effective even in the face of uncertainty and obstacles. Third, servant leaders cultivate personal integrity among team members to create a spiritual climate within the team (Liden et al., 2008; Schaubroeck et al., 2011), which elicits team members to cooperate with and care about each other and enables them to be optimistic about their team's capabilities to be effective.

Although available research on servant leadership has been highly supportive, much additional work is needed to better understand the antecedents and consequences of servant leadership, as well as contextual variables that may influence the way in which servant leadership relates to individual, team, and organizational outcomes (Liden, Panaccio et al., 2014; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Additional research is needed to explore servant leadership across a wider range of cultures, as the majority of available research studies have relied on samples taken from the U.S. (Ehrhart, 2004; Hunter et al., 2013; Liden et al., 2008; Liden, Wayne et al., 2014; Peterson et al., 2012), Canada (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016; Lapointe, & Vandenberghe, in press), China (Chen et al., 2015; Han, Kakabadse, & Kakabadse, 2010; Hu & Liden, 2011; Schaubroeck et al., 2011;), Africa (Hale, & Fields, 2007; Walumbwa et al., 2010) and Europe (Sousa & Van Dierendonck, in press; Van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Although research to this date has shown highly consistent results supporting the efficacy of servant leadership across national cultures, to enhance generalizability, research on servant leadership is needed in other parts of the world, including Mexico, South America, and other parts of Asia besides China, such as India, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

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