



Getting to Know the Elephant: A Call to Advance Servant Leadership through Construct Consensus, Empirical Evidence, and Multilevel Theoretical Development

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Getting to Know the Elephant: A Call to Advance Servant Leadership through Construct Consensus, Empirical Evidence, and Multilevel Theoretical Development

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Abstract

This essay examines the challenges facing servant leadership as a theoretical construct, specifically the variety of definitions that results in a lack of construct clarity, the lack of agreed upon measures, and the sparse empirical evidence. This essay addresses the need for consensus, empirical research, and examination of the phenomenon of servant leadership across multiple levels of the organization.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Construct Clarity, Construct Confusion, Construct Validity, Construct Consensus, Theory Building, Empirical Evidence, Models, Multilevel Theoretical Development

When we took on the role of editors for *Servant Leadership: Theory & Practice*, we made it our mission “to advance servant leadership, both as a field of academic study and as a management practice” (SLTP, 2015). Our ultimate aim is furthering thoughtful research that will influence both scholars and practitioners with the ultimate goal of creating a deeper understanding of servant leadership as a philosophy, a leadership process, and a “way of life” as Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990) described it. In effect, we seek to publish research in keeping with the dimensions of theoretical contribution as

defined by Corley and Gioia (2011). Specifically, we are looking for original research that is either *revelatory* or *incremental*. Likewise, we seek research that is high in *utility*, be it practical, scientific, or both. In addition, we seek “prescient” research in terms of scholarly work that pursues theory down paths that will serve scholarly and practitioner needs in an ever-evolving world.

Theory helps us make sense of the complex phenomena within our world (Weick, 1995). Many scholars have provided insight into what constitutes theory (cf. Bacharach, 1989; Davis & Marquis, 2005; Kilduff, 2006; LePine & King, 2010; Suddaby, 2010, 2014; Suddaby, Hardy, & Huy, 2011; Sutton & Staw, 1995; Weick, 1989; Whetten, 1989). Some scholars opine that there is too much theory (Hambrick, 2007; Pfeffer, 2014) and yet a lack of testing theory (Davis & Marquis, 2005). Theory often proves useless to practitioners unless it is based on evidence (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Rousseau, 2006; Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001), and examination of practitioner cases is not sufficient (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). However, focus solely on empirical development without solid theory leads to atheoretical “dustbowl empiricism” that does not truly advance our understanding (cf. Suddaby, 2014).

Within the field of servant leadership, the problem is neither the over-reliance upon empirical testing nor the lack of it, even though such empiricism is still in its nascency. The problem with servant leadership is also not the lack of usefulness to practitioners, as illustrated by the expansive practice of servant leadership within organizations of every sort. At the foundational level, the most serious issue within the theory of servant leadership is construct clarity (Suddaby, 2010).

As scholars working in the field, it is our responsibility to shed light on the phenomenon. Within this essay, we provide some basic definition to servant leadership, delineate its current status in comparison to the more scholarly developed concept of transformational leadership. We discuss the challenges facing servant leadership as a theory, offer solutions, and describe the state of findings as they relate to the “entire elephant” or “big picture” such that researchers can contemplate better approaches to advancing theory within the field.

Our commentary on this current state of servant leadership is not meant as harsh criticism but rather as a call for thoughtful organization, direction, and extension of our understanding of the servant leader phenomenon. We simply believe that servant leadership would benefit from the establishment of *construct clarity* in terms of *definition, scope conditions, relationships with other constructs, and coherency* (Suddaby, 2010). We argue that more consensus is needed in terms of what is and is not servant leadership, such that a clear, concise, and accurate definition, as well as thoughtfully circumscribed parameters. *Construct confusion* and *conceptual disunity* needs to give rise to greater construct clarity. Certainly these theoretical goals are not easily achievable given that so many scholars and practitioners differ in terms of their own opinions of the construct. However, for advancement of the theory, some organization, presentation of the similarities and differences among definitions, and construct consensus needs to occur.

An Unorthodox Approach to Modern Challenges

Leadership in general is considered a means of influencing followers within an organization in such a way as to direct them and motivate them toward achieving specific shared goals (Barrow, 1977; Cyert, 2006; Plsek & Wilson, 2001). Servant leadership takes what seems to be a winding road to such ends by seeking first to serve the interests of the followers, rather than to first serve organizational goals. Servant leadership as defined by Greenleaf (1977) envisions a servant leader as a person who assumes the role of leader out of a desire to serve. Advancement of a shared vision is achieved by addressing the highest priority needs, empowering, and developing followers through a variety of mechanisms that will lead them to becoming servants as well. Much like Gilligan's (1982) ethic of caring, an advanced stage of moral development with a focus on others, servant leadership supports ethical behavior by promoting self-reflective, morally-centered leadership more than other leadership styles (Giampetro-Meyer, Brown, Browne, & Kubasek, 1998).

Greenleaf wrote his foundational essays (1970, 1972a, 1972b, cf. Greenleaf, 1977) after retiring from his thirty-eight year career as an AT&T manager in 1964. He summed up the *raison d'être* of servant leadership in his (1970) essay, *The Servant as Leader* — servant leadership manifests when a leader can answer affirmatively to the following: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?” (p. 27). Greenleaf spent the remainder of his life promoting his unorthodox concept of servant leadership through lectures at various universities such as M.I.T., Harvard, and Dartmouth, and through his consulting work within the Ford Foundation, Lilly Endowment, R.K. Mellon Foundation, and the American Foundation for Management. He encouraged the adoption of servant leadership within organizations of every sort. In truth, servant leadership is not a new concept. It has been practiced across many cultures throughout history (cf. Covey, 1990; Nyabadza, 2003). Its underlying philosophy exists within the major religions and within the writings of many historical thought leaders (Ebener and O’Connell, 2010; Keith, 2008; Lanctot & Irving, 2007; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Winston, 2004).

Today, arguments in support of servant leadership as an appropriate means of meeting today’s complex organizational needs are being espoused by a growing number of researchers (Chin & Smith, 2006). For many scholars, however, the philosophy of putting the needs of followers first seemingly runs counter to any logical form of viable organizational leadership, expressing that it might even be detrimental, especially within for-profit and mission-driven institutions (Andersen, 2009).

While servant-led organizations have sometimes been described as “high performing organizations” (p. 604), the process by which they are high-performing remains virtually unexplored (Winston, 2004). In fact, as an overall theory, servant leadership has been described as lacking any sort of theoretical and empirical support (Andersen, 2009; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Northouse, 1997). In their comparison of authentic leadership development theory with transformational, charismatic, spiritual, and servant leadership,

Avolio and Gardner (2005) argue that many of the foundational characteristics of servant leadership, such as leader awareness, empathy, and foresight, lack any grounding whatsoever within the psychological literature. They state that servant leadership completely lacks any theoretical foundation and is nearly bereft of empirical support. They also note that the mediating role of follower characteristics and organizational context are largely ignored within the literature. Since its origination, servant leadership as an organizational theory has made slow advances within the academic literature. Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) called for empirical studies in 1999, yet one of the first empirical studies was published five years later by Ehrhart (2004). Since then, such empirical investigations have increased, albeit at a unhurried pace.

Much of the early servant leadership research was anecdotal (Bowman, 1997; Northouse, 1997; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). The popularity of servant leadership is largely derived from management and leadership authors publishing within the popular press who tout servant leadership as a form of leadership with positive outcomes for both organizations and employees, yet present scant evidence (DePree, 1989; Covey, 1990; Senge, 1990; Block, 1993; Wheatley, 2005). In addition, the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership publishes numerous monographs in support of servant leadership (cf. Frick, 1995; Kelley, 1995; Rasmussen, 1995; Senge, 1995; Snodgrass, 1993; Spears, 1995, 1996). With scant empirical evidence offered by these popular press outlets, some people question whether it is simply a fad. From a theoretical development perspective, much can be learned from practitioners, but the nature of case studies and opinion are such that a knowledge gap separates them from theoretical development due to differences in contextualization and problematization (cf. Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

Despite the fact that an article concerning servant leadership appeared in the inaugural issue of *Leadership Quarterly* (Graham, 1991), there was little scholarly interest until the early 2000s. Today, a strong argument exists within the literature that servant leadership is conceptually distinct from other forms of leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Ehrhart, 2004; Liden, Wayne, Zhao & Henderson, 2008; Parolini, Patterson & Winston, 2009). Increasing effort has been made by scholars in recent years to define servant leadership theoretically and to compare and contrast it, conceptually and empirically, with other forms of leadership (cf. Liden et al., 2008; Neubert, Kacmar, & Roberts, 2008; Parolini et al., 2009; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Empirical support is just now beginning to catch up, yet many organizations move forward at full speed in terms of putting servant leadership into practice (Bass, 2008; Spears, 2005).

Despite existing for more than four and a half decades as a construct, servant leadership remains an ever elusive and under-developed phenomenon in the sense that it has yet to be packaged into a set of replicable best management practices (Brumback, 1999; Wong, Davey & Church, 2007). Greenleaf (1970, 1977) himself forewarned of this reductionism, stating that it is an unorthodox approach to leadership, which is less of a management technique and more of a way of life (Frick, 2004; Spears, 1995) to be contemplated, stating “it is meant to be neither a scholarly treatise nor a how-to-do-it manual” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 49).

An Alternative to Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) remains the most popular leadership topic in scholarly research, having more studies concerning it than all other leadership theories combined (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). However, researchers are increasingly realizing that transformational leadership may not be the only means of achieving organizational goals, while changing demands are challenging the traditional conceptualization of leadership. This can be seen in the development of alternative leadership theories, such as authentic, transcendent, spiritual, self-sacrificial, and ethical leadership (cf. Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Matteson & Irving, 2006; Yukl, Mahsud, Hassan & Prussia, 2013).

The egoistic nature of transformational leadership has been contrasted with the altruistic nature of servant leadership (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Whittington, 2004). Scholars have described transformational leadership as a less morally robust form of leadership because of its focus on organizational objectives over service (Graham, 1991; Parolini et al., 2009; Whetstone, 2002). Stephens and colleagues (Stephens, D'Intino & Victor, 1995) argue that transformational leaders are more willing to violate ethical norms, thus overriding stakeholder interests in favor of organizational outcomes, whereas servant leaders will be more principle-centered (Covey, 1998) and will make organizational outcomes a lower priority than their own personal values and the needs of followers (Stone et al., 2004). Countervailing arguments by proponents of transformational leadership point toward an important role for ethics within transformational leadership. Transformational leadership has been described as resting on a foundation of ethical leadership originating from a leader's values and vision, and a morally-grounded organizational culture (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Somewhat blurring the lines between servant leadership and transformational leadership as a process, though not in terms of end state, Kanungo (2001) asserts that transformational leaders utilize altruistic forms of empowerment to transform followers, shifting their self-interests toward the collective values, interests, and goals of the organization. However, Covey (2006) states that the principle-centered moral authority within servant leadership is not manipulative in achieving shared goals. Instead, it is respectful of follower's freedom to choose their own course of actions, providing opportunities for making their voice heard and shaping the shared vision.

Similar to Avolio and Gardner (2005), Andersen (2009) presents a counter-argument to the appropriateness of servant leadership from a management perspective, suggesting the lack of empirical support concerning the positive impact of servant leadership on organizational outcomes makes it a questionable practice. He notes that attainment of organizational goals can be difficult or even impossible when followers' goals become the main focus, thus making it an illogical form of organizational leadership.

Regardless of the debate as to the appropriateness of servant leadership as compared to transformational leadership, organizations are increasingly moving away from more traditional forms of hierarchical, top-down, and patriarchal leadership (Crippen, 2005; Magoni, 2003; Nwogu, 2004) in which employees serve their leaders (Sergiovanni, 2000). Today, the escalating focus on innovation, employee well-being and engagement,

accountability, social responsibility, ethical management, meeting the needs of all stakeholders, and Millennial needs has led to more employee-centric organizational climates. Management theorists are shifting away from framing the leader-follower relationship within an agency theory perspective, which conceptualizes the agents as opportunistic and self-serving, and therefore requiring greater monitoring by principals. This shift is toward self-actualizing, trustworthy, and team-serving leadership focused on making a difference (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997).

To wit, servant leadership has gained traction among the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work for in America (Ruschman, 2002). It is increasingly being presented as an approach in meeting these modern organizational challenges because of its focus on the needs of followers (Patterson, 2003; Van Dierendonck, 2011). In fact, because servant leadership serves all stakeholders (Hamilton & Bean, 2005), many perceive it as especially appropriate given the growth of organizational complexity and increase in conflicting stakeholder demands (Pache & Santos, 2010, 2011).

Conceptual Disunity and Research Opportunity

The elephant of servant leadership, as we refer to it in the title, can be thought of through the lens of the obvious-yet-unspoken-of “elephant in the room.” Scholars avoid addressing the construct confusion and conceptual disunity that exist at the core of servant leadership as a theory. Little research effort has been undertaken to define the scope conditions (Suddaby, 2010) of the construct in terms of clarifying whether servant leadership is a full-range leadership process or a leadership style, a philosophy or a set of practices, a set of characteristics or a set of behaviors, and so forth. Parris and Peachey (2013) recently performed a systematic literature review of servant leadership more rigorous than most literature reviews. They examined 39 studies in an attempt to provide an empirical explanation for how servant leadership works. They noted that the literature consists primarily of conceptual work, especially in terms of characteristics (Spears, 1998; Laub, 1999; Patterson, 2003), measurement development (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Ehrhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2008; Page & Wong, 2000; Sendjaya, Sarros & Santora, 2008; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; Wong & Page, 2003), and theoretical framework development (Russell & Stone, 2002; Van Dierendonck, 2011), with very little continued direct exploration of prior theoretical development for the purposes of incremental advancement of theory. Parris and Peachey (2013) also reported that servant leadership is currently being investigated within many contexts and cultures and that servant leadership is a legitimate theory that can help followers develop, with results suggesting that characteristics of servant leadership vary in their importance depending upon the culture.

The “elephant” of servant leadership has a long memory, as illustrated by the fact that scholars and practitioners primarily return to the earliest works of Greenleaf (1970, 1972a, 1972b, 1977), Spears (1998), and Laub (1999) to serve as the basis for their own work. Despite a strong reliance upon these early theoretical efforts, scholars continue to present a wide range of conceptualizations that generate further conceptual confusion (Van Dierendonck, 2011). This expansive effort of conceptualization emphasizes the

“disciplined imagination” (Weick, 1989) of scholars working in the field; they have created, examined, and retained numerous conceptualizations of servant leadership. While the wide range of models, measures, and taxonomies of characteristics that exist provide insight, they’ve simultaneously muddled the field. Scholars continue to define and redefine servant leadership creating ever greater inconsistency. Clarity on what constitutes servant leadership has thus far rested with the personal opinions of researchers without any solid grounding in consensually established theory. In many respects, this is to be expected given that sensemaking is still taking place at the conceptual level. However, over forty years after the introduction of servant leadership, this lack of precision stymies advancement in many respects because scholars are speaking different languages, or – applying the parable most appropriate to the title – they are as “blind men” to the “elephant,” each one identifying some aspects of the phenomenon while ignoring others. One challenge is moving forward in research without presenting a specific position from a point of advocacy, thus continuing to allow for an inductive approach.

Parris and Peachey (2013) noted that most of the scholarly research has focused on construct development (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Ehrhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2008; Parolini et al., 2009; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Despite that fact, that there remains no consensus in terms of a definition for servant leadership that clarifies what is and is not included specifically within the construct’s content domain. Unlike other forms of leadership, and underlying all conceptualizations of the leadership process within the field of servant leadership, is the underpinning of “leader as servant.” Many attempts have been made to define the characteristics of such leaders (Spears, 1998; Keith, 2008; Prosser, 2010). According to Larry Spears (1998), Greenleaf’s personal writings elucidated ten such mechanisms (listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building), though Spears acknowledged that other servant leadership characteristics and mechanisms exist.

A review of the literature by Russell and Stone (2002) suggested that there were nine functional attributes. These distinctive characteristics of servant leaders include: vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment (cf. Covey, 1996; Greenleaf, 1977; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Laub, 1999, 2003; Pollard, 1996; Spears, 1998). They, in turn, are supported by eleven accompanying attributes: communication, credibility, competence, stewardship, visibility, influence, persuasion, listening, encouragement, teaching, and delegation. These outcomes will also be influenced by a variety of pre-existing organizational characteristics including organizational values, culture, practices, and politics, as well as employee attitudes (Russell & Stone, 2002). However, in turn, these attributes will likewise influence the organization. In particular, the influence of servant leadership on culture will facilitate positive work attitudes and behaviors that lead to performance.

Additional scholars have continued to redefine the characteristics of servant leadership. For instance, Washington, Sutton, and Feild (2006) highlight the values of empathy, integrity, and competence, while work by Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) provides

an integrated servant leadership model consisting of five factors: altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, wisdom, and organizational stewardship. Van Dierendonck (2011) later identified six key characteristics: empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship.

A wide range of assessment instruments have been developed and utilized based on various sets of characteristics associated with servant leadership (i.e., Liden et al., 2008; Peterson, Galvin & Lange, 2012; Reed, Vidaver-Cohen, & Colwell, 2011; Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Out of the twenty seven empirical survey-based studies Parris and Peachey (2013) examined, fourteen different instruments were used to measure servant leadership, highlighting the problem of multiple definitions and construct confusion. While there are many instruments in use, many of which lack psychometric examination, there are no broadly accepted measures of servant leadership thereby resulting in theoretical disunity (Andersen, 2009; Parris & Peachey, 2013).

This confusion remains an issue, making it unclear as to the specific domain content within the construct, and virtually impossible to objectively categorize leaders as servant leaders. The construct confusion also leaves any research open to criticism due to the lack of an agreed upon taxonomy of characteristics (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Unlike the “well-tilled soil” of many areas of organizational research, the resulting disunity within the servant leadership field provides the opportunity for scholars to develop the types of highly original and useful research that Corley and Gioia (2011) identified. Continuing the conversation by means of incremental yet important furtherance of our understanding will be invaluable, especially given the need to bring a sense of continuity and order within the field.

Potential Solutions

First, we contend that conceptual disunity and construct confusion should continue to be addressed and rectified through both qualitative and quantitative approaches. By means of a qualitative approach, meaningfulness by way of grounded theory building may enhance conceptualization of servant leadership, providing construct clarity in the forms of a better definition and coherency. Continued emphasis on empirical data will ground theory-building efforts in evidence, providing a better understanding of scope boundaries and relationships between servant leadership and other constructs. Together, both forms of research will provide legitimacy and enhance the value of servant leadership by shifting it away from the limiting boundaries of a philosophy toward a learnable and teachable set of practices that can be further developed by means of open source organizational learning as a means of structured and broader-reaching contemplation.

Second, we posit that a multilevel process approach to servant leadership theory building would enhance the value of servant leadership by examining the phenomenon as an organizational process. Theories of leadership explain complex organizational processes, provide the basis for identifying contingencies, and help identify potential outcomes of the phenomenon (Bass, 2008). A few studies have examined servant

leadership in relation to other organizational processes. These studies include investigations of servant leadership in relation to organizational change (Hamilton & Bean, 2005), leadership development (Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011), and succession planning (Dingman & Stone, 2007). By means of continued multilevel modeling and examination of complexities, the servant leadership process could be explored at all organizational levels both qualitatively and quantitatively, which could potentially improve servant leadership as a distinct and practically useful theory.

Multilevel Models of Servant Leadership

More empirical research of servant leadership is needed at multiple levels of analysis in order to increase construct clarity. This type of research could help provide construct scope through evidence concerning the homologous validity and applicability (cf. Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999; Rousseau, 1985) of variables at different levels of analysis and it would also provide greater understanding of the relationship servant leadership has with other constructs. Empirical research into servant leadership took off in the early 2000s, but our understanding of servant leadership as an organizational phenomenon across multiple organizational levels remains in its nascency (Hunter, Neubert, Perry, Witt, Penney & Weinberger, 2013). There is a need for research on servant leadership from multiple stakeholder perspectives (Van Dierendonck, 2011) and at different levels of analysis. Multilevel theoretical models that examine multilevel outcomes from a multi-stakeholder perspective are necessary for advancing our understanding of leadership as a process within a larger system (cf. Hunter et al., 2013; Liden et al., 2008; Yammarino & Bass, 1991). There are many potential individual, group, and organizational level characteristics that could be further examined using a multilevel analysis. This is illustrated by the contribution of multilevel models within transformational leadership theory, which have provided insight into the individual level process of transformational leadership in relation to social level constructs such as climate and culture (cf. Liao & Chuang, 2007; Wallace, Butts, Johnson, Stevens, & Smith, 2013; Wang & Howell, 2012).

A variety of servant leadership models have also been offered by various scholars such as Farling and colleagues (1999), Laub (1998), Page and Wong (2000), Sendjaya and Sarros (2002), and Wong (2003). Over time, theoretical development has led to more multilevel and process-oriented models, such as Liden et al., (2008), Liden, Panaccio, Meuser, Hu, and Wayne (2014), Patterson (2003), and Winston (2003, 2004).

Van Dierendonck (2011) presented a highly useful multilevel model that illustrates the underlying process of servant leadership based on theory and empirical evidence from the servant leadership literature and related fields that highlighted the servant leader's motivation to both lead and serve. The model includes antecedents and outcomes of servant leadership. Servant leadership impacts the leader-follower relationship and the general organizational climate, which affects followers' self-actualization, positive job attitudes and increased performance, the effectiveness of teams, and sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) at the organizational level. The model also notes

reciprocation by followers as a feedback loop, enforcing the positive influence of servant leaders.

In the following sections, we briefly summarize the current development of servant leadership as a construct at the different levels of analysis.

Overview of Servant Leadership at the Individual Level

Both leader and follower characteristics could be examined at the individual level. Most of the research has primarily focused on servant leaders. While no demographic differences were identified within one study (Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson & Jinks, 2007), two other studies noted differences in servant leaders based on gender (Fridell, Newcome Belcher & Messner, 2009) and socio-economics (McCuddy & Cavin, 2009). Barrick, Mitchell, & Stewart (2003) have examined the influence of personality, particularly the Big Five, on follower motivation, behaviors, and attitudes through the lens of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977). Recent studies of personality, for instance, suggest that agreeableness is positively related to servant leadership (Hunter et al., 2013; Washington et al., 2006) while extraversion (Hunter et al., 2013) and narcissism (Peterson et al., 2012) are negatively related to it (Hunter et al., 2013).

Leadership is shaped and defined by personal philosophy (Ehigie & Akpan, 2004; Mullins, 1996). The values of servant leaders have been greatly examined within the literature. Values are underlying “prescriptive, enduring standards” (Rokeach, 1973). Values influence the ways in which people process information and interpret situations; accept and reject goals; develop and maintain interpersonal relationships; guide for decision-making and problem-solving; and ultimately determine leadership performance and organizational success (England & Lee, 1974; Russell, 2001; Washington et al., 2006). Therefore, furthering our understanding of values within the process of servant leadership is crucial. Graham (1991) argued that servant leadership is morally grounded and inspirational, fitting with Covey’s conceptualization of “principle-centered leadership” (1990). Many servant leadership scholars contend that the attributes of servant leadership originate from the core beliefs and personal values of leaders (cf. Covey, 1990; Russell, 2001; Russell & Stone, 2002). Values are made manifest in attitudes and behaviors that form the essence of servant leadership (DePree, 1992; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Schein, 2010).

Motivation to lead has been identified as a major influence on leadership processes (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). Servant leaders are presumed to lead out of their desire to serve (Covey, 1990; Greenleaf, 1977; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Russell & Stone, 2002; Turner, 2000). According to Greenleaf (1970), servant leadership “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first” (p. 27). Further examination of motivation to lead in relation to servant leader values, personality, and other individual differences can improve our definition of a servant leader.

Researchers have found empirical support for positive relationships with several work attitudes including job satisfaction (cf. Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Hebert, 2003; Jenkins & Stewart, 2008, 2010; West, Bocarnea, & Maranon, 2009), supervisor

satisfaction (Sun & Wang, 2009), need satisfaction (Mayer, Bardes, & Piccolo, 2008), perceived organizational support (Sun & Wang, 2009; West et al., 2009), organizational commitment (cf. Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009a; West & Bocarnea, 2008; West et al., 2009), person–organization fit (Jaramillo et al., 2009a), role clarity (West et al., 2009), empowerment (Earnhardt, 2008; Horsman, 2001), leader and organizational trust (Joseph & Winston, 2005; Reinke, 2003), and engagement (Walumbwa, Wang, Wang, Schaubroeck, & Avolio, 2010). Servant leadership has been shown to be negatively related to disengagement (Hunter et al., 2013), turnover intention (cf. Babakus, Yavas & Ashill, 2011; Hunter et al., 2013), and job stress (Jaramillo et al., 2009a). Many of these findings align with similar findings within meta-analyses of high LMX relationships (Gerstner & Day, 1997), trust in leadership (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) and behavioral integrity of leaders (Davis & Rothstein, 2006).

A variety of positive relationships between servant leadership and performance related outcomes have also been identified, including employee performance (Liden et al., 2008; Neubert et al., 2008), sales behavior, customer orientation and related extra role performance (Hunter et al., 2013; Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009b), extra effort (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), leadership effectiveness (cf. Hu & Liden, 2011; Irving & Longbotham, 2007), goal and process clarity (Hu & Liden, 2011), helping behavior (Babakus et al., 2011; Hunter et al., 2013; Neubert et al., 2008), innovative and creative behavior (Neubert et al., 2008; Panaccio, Henderson, Liden, Wayne, & Cao, 2014), deviant behavior (Neubert et al., 2008), and organizational citizenship behaviors (Ehrhart, 2004; Ng, Koh & Goh, 2008).

Overview of Servant Leadership at the Dyadic Level

The high quality LMX (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Liden & Maslyn, 1998) relationships that are expected to exist between servant leaders and their followers rest upon the leaders' personal values (Russell, 2001) and their desire to serve (Ng et al., 2008). Leaders that demonstrate humility help create a work environment in which followers perceive greater safety and trust, and reciprocate in trust (Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010). The result is that followers will voluntarily follow, while the leader creates the right balance between autonomy and direction (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leaders often engender high levels of trust (Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010), thus creating a context in which followers feel comfortable mimicking their leaders' behaviors (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005; Graham, 1991). Servant leaders provide followers with hope and help sustain organizational virtuousness through positive micro-behaviors and macro-behaviors (Searle & Barbuto, 2010).

Servant leadership is rooted in interpersonal trust (cf. Reinke, 2003; Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010). Servant leadership helps awaken, engage, and develop followers by means of leader humility, authenticity, and interpersonal acceptance. Servant leaders demonstrate a fundamental appreciation of others by respecting, encouraging, and empowering those they serve, by inspiring them with courage, hope, workplace spirituality (Herman, 2010), and feelings of psychological safety (Russell, 2001), thereby nurturing a positive climate (Black, 2010; Jaramillo et al., 2009a; Neubert et al., 2008).

Overview of Servant Leadership at the Group and Organizational Levels

Culture and climate are two organizational phenomena that have been studied at both the group and organizational levels (Glick, 1988; Patterson, Payne, & West, 1996; Zohar, 2000). Organizational climate is the shared perception of policies, practices, and procedures (cf. Ostroff, Kinicki & Tamkins, 2003; Patterson, West, Shackleton, Dawson, Lawthron, Maitlis, & Wallace, 2005; Schneider & Reichers, 1983), whereas culture consists of the shared underlying assumptions, values, and beliefs that define the nature of the organization. New organizational members are socialized into the proper way to think, feel, and behave based on these assumptions, values, and beliefs (Schein, 2010; Trice & Beyer, 1993; Zohar & Hofmann, 2012).

Employees' psychological climate (James & Jones, 1974), consisting of their perceptions of the work environment, are in aggregate referred to as organizational climate (Patterson et al., 2005; Rousseau, 1988). Through the social exchange process of reciprocation at the dyadic level (Blau, 1964), followers increasingly adopt a servant leadership mindset. Collectively, this process will generate and sustain an organizational climate in which followers feel safe using their own knowledge in making decisions without fear should they fail, thus allowing for continuous development and learning (McGee-Cooper & Loooper, 2001). Servant leadership is related to procedural justice (cf. Ehrhart, 2004; Joseph & Winston, 2005; Reinke, 2004; Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010). It creates a sense of fairness through its sensitivity to follower needs, focus on their growth and well-being, and ethical orientation (Mayer et al., 2008). Delegation, empowerment, and participatory leadership are also essential parts of a servant leadership climate (Neuschel, 1998). Servant leadership builds community and a safe organizational climate through its emphasis on trust, fairness, and simultaneous focus on the goals of the organization, societal good, and the needs of employees (McGee-Cooper & Loooper, 2001).

Within servant leader-follower relationships, followers reciprocate their leaders' support, thus creating a virtuous cycle of influence that affects leadership, organizational climate, follower attitudes, and performance (Russell & Stone, 2002; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Hunter and colleagues (2013) present a cycle of service model that suggests servant leaders create the conditions within a service climate (cf. Schneider, Salvaggio, & Subirats, 2002) that induce followers to engage personally in servant leadership, resulting in discretionary helping behaviors in the form of work assistance and encouragement. This aligns with prior research that suggests service climate is positively related to helping behaviors (Schneider, Ehrhart, Mayer, Saltz, & Niles-Jolly, 2005).

Leadership and organizational culture have been described as linked phenomena that can only be understood in combination with one another (Schein, 2010). The values of an organization's leaders are embedded within all levels of the organization and form the basis for the organizational cultures (Ford, Wilderom, & Caparella, 2008; Kilcourse, 1994; Schein, 2010). "Shared values give everyone an internal compass that enables them to act independently and interdependently, responsibly and publicly" (Kouzes & Posner,

1995, p. 53). Schein (2010) noted that once an organizational culture is in place, the organizational values will serve as a selection tool in identifying leaders who fit within the culture. Culture also influences leadership behaviors, shaping perceptions and decisions (Jaskyte, 2010; Walter & Bruch, 2009). This does not preclude organizations that do not practice servant leadership from changing, since new challenges provide opportunities for cultural development and the establishment of new or different values (Schein, 2010). The learning experiences of organizational members and the assumptions, beliefs, and values of new members cause cultures to change. Leaders reinforce culture through a variety of embedding mechanisms that communicate both explicitly and implicitly their personal assumptions, beliefs, and values.

Servant leaders develop cultures in which followers become servant leaders (Melchar & Bosco, 2010). Servant leadership culture has been found to be related to customer service, creativity, organizational identification, employee and organizational performance, and intention to remain with the organization (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014). Organizational culture is also the mechanism by which servant leadership impacts trust (Giampetro-Meyer et al., 1998). The dimensions of humane orientation and power distance, examined within the GLOBE study of leadership (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) have been identified in an effort to understand the influence of culture on servant leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Smith, Montagno, and Kuzmenko (2004) contend that servant leadership and transformational leadership lead to the development of very different organizational cultures. They speculate that transformational leadership will lead to a proactive, empowered, innovative, and dynamic culture that will be more successful in a dynamic environment, whereas servant leadership will lead to a spiritual, nurturing, and safe culture that would be more suitable for a static environment.

Servant leadership has been linked with group and organizational performance (cf. Ehrhart, 2004; Hu & Liden, 2011) and with team collaboration and effectiveness (cf. Irving & Longbotham, 2007; Mayer et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2007). Fitting with the research on humility by Morris, Brotheridge, and Urbanski (2005) and Nielsen, Marrone, & Slay (2010), CEOs practicing servant leadership and lacking narcissism were found to be effective organizational leaders in terms of firm performance measured as return on assets (Peterson, Galvin, & Lange, 2012). In addition, at the organizational level, charismatic and transformational leadership have been found to fall short of producing sufficient corporate social responsibility (CSR; Waldman, Siegel, and Javidan, 2006). Whereas, servant leadership influences CSR and sustainability through involvement in the community and creating positive stakeholder relationships (Burlingham, 2005).

Visualizing the Entire Elephant

Understanding that references are not theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995), we offer the previous sections not to advance theory, but to summarize the current state of research in servant leadership at different levels of analysis. This review is certainly not comprehensive, but it highlights advancements that have been made. Dinh, Lord, Gardner, Meuser, Liden, & Hu (2014) recently reported a total of 60 articles at the

individual level, 10 articles at the dyadic level, 20 articles at the group level, and 10 articles at the organizational level have been published within ten top tier journals from January 2000 to September 2012. Despite this fact, servant leadership was low ranked among the various leadership theories published. Nevertheless, the advances in servant leadership research at different levels of analysis over the past ten years have been very promising.

As theoretical development continues to advance, our understanding of servant leadership will provide us with additional opportunities to join in the conversation together in hopes of reaching construct consensus. While empirical research at this stage continues to operate at the level of the blind man, or at least the poorly-sighted man, over time, the image of the entire elephant will be filled in and we will be able to recognize servant leadership as a multilevel, holistic process, thereby increasing our understanding of servant leadership's scope and relationship with other constructs. Servant leadership theory will thereby benefit from the resulting coherency. We encourage you to join us in bringing together the full picture so that we can achieve construct clarity and get to know the elephant in the room, because it appears to be both a real and a friendly elephant.

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