



What If We Took Servant Leadership Seriously?

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Preface, Inaugural Issue

Servant Leadership: Theory & Practice

The arrival of a new business journal is a singular opportunity in the emergence of a field of inquiry. It signals that there is a coherent and sufficient body of knowledge about a topic to warrant a new publication outlet. It energizes and encourages other academics to consider the topic more seriously and to become more engaged in its intellectual discourse. Perhaps most critically, the arrival of a new journal also draws attention from practitioners and, in so doing, helps shape how leaders view organizations and their contributions to their firms.

I am honored to be asked to write the preface for this inaugural issue of *Servant Leadership: Theory & Practice*. Servant leadership is emerging not only as an important academic topic in its own right, but also as an overarching philosophy for leading others. As such, the time for this new journal dedicated to servant leadership has come. Its arrival not only acknowledges the impressive amount of evidence which has been accumulating in the field, but also presages new and exciting discoveries in the future. For both academics and practitioners alike, *Servant Leadership: Theory & Practice* offers the opportunity to share the best in evidence-based knowledge with interested readers.

Servant Leadership: Theory

What might theory-building look like if we took servant leadership seriously? The first major task facing researchers in servant leadership would be drawing the boundaries around the construct itself. What are the key, central elements of that construct? How does servant leadership differ from other constructs with which it shares its domain, such as participative leadership and employee-centered leadership? Are there degrees of

servant leadership, or is it an all-or-nothing proposition? Is servant leadership a kind of leadership or is it a type of organizational culture as well?

The second major task facing researchers in servant leadership is identifying the dependent (performance) variables it is likely to influence. For instance, it might be the case that servant leadership has a larger impact on organizational citizenship behaviors than on day-to-day performance on routine tasks. Alternatively, servant leadership may have little impact on creativity and innovation, but may significantly cut down on the amount of counterproductive behavior in the workplace. Servant leadership may not have an equally powerful impact on all areas of endeavor, and it is critical to understand where servant leadership has the most (and least) impact on followers.

The third major task facing researchers in servant leadership is identifying the processes through which servant leadership influences others. An interesting possibility here is that servant leadership contributes to higher quality leader-member exchanges (relationships), which in turn lead to more positive employee behaviors. Another possibility is that servant leadership is empowering and that employees who are empowered engage in more constructive behaviors at work. Yet another possibility is that servant leadership signals greater organizational support and this perceived organizational support energizes employees to go the extra mile. In sum, it is important to know not just *that* servant leadership has an impact on others, but also *why* and *how* servant leadership has that impact.

There are many more potential avenues for future research here, but let me identify at least two more which I believe warrant additional consideration. Most of the research on servant leadership to date has examined how servant leaders influence followers. This focus, while entirely appropriate, has left two other important questions unanswered. First, what is the impact of being a servant leader on the servant leader himself/herself? That is, how does being a servant leader shape one's self-concept and one's self-esteem? Second, what is the impact of a servant leadership culture on relationships *among peers*? That is, how does servant leadership influence how followers treat each other? For instance, perhaps servant leadership leads to the creation of more social capital, which in turn leads to greater cohesion and coherence of the organization's culture. Thus, increases in social capital might be the key factor linking changes at the dyadic level (leader-subordinate) of analysis to changes in the overall culture and performance of a firm.

Servant Leadership: Practice

In several ways, the growing interest in servant leadership in academia has mirrored changes in the zeitgeist regarding charismatic and heroic leadership. Since 2007 in particular, our attention has been drawn to the over-sized egos, over-sized paychecks, and over-sized personalities of CEOs – and, simultaneously, to the underwhelming performance of their companies. At the societal level, there is greater discussion about growing wealth inequality and the wage gap between CEOs and the rest of the workforce. Thus, in industry as well as in academia, there is growing concern about larger-than-life CEOs and greater interest in alternative models of leadership that might be more effective.

There are multiple questions to be asked about servant leadership in practice, and below are some with which to start that conversation. From a practitioner perspective, what are the key behaviors which trigger positive responses from employees? How can one balance the needs of one's followers with the needs of one's customers and shareholders? What managerial systems and processes have to be put into place to implement and sustain servant leadership? How can a servant leadership style be driven from the top of the organization to the bottom – or how can individuals at lower levels of the organization try to bring servant leadership practices to bear higher up the chain of command? This journal will provide leaders and managers with opportunities to share with each other – and with academics – the lessons they have learned about being servant leaders, about changing to a servant leadership style, and about introducing a servant leadership culture into their organization.

Conclusion

I hope you will enjoy reading this inaugural issue of *Servant Leadership: Theory & Practice* and bring it to the attention of your colleagues. The journal welcomes contributions from both academics and practitioners and encourages discourse across multiple groups of readers. If we indeed take servant leadership seriously, we can enrich both the quality of academic research on leadership and the quality of working life in organizations today.

Brief Biographical Note

Daniel C. Feldman is the Synovus Chair of Servant Leadership and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the Terry College of Business, University of Georgia. He received his Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior from Yale University. Dr. Feldman is the author of seven books and over 150 articles on managing careers in organizations and his research has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Bloomberg/BusinessWeek*. He has served as Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Management* and as Chair of the Careers Division of the Academy of Management.