



# Exploring Servant Leadership in a Top-Down Environment

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## Abstract

*This study used both Greenleaf's (1977) theory of servant leadership and Spears's (1995) ten characteristics of servant leadership to explore the concept in a top-down environment. The study proposed to answer the research question: To what extent, if any, is a mayor of a metropolitan area in the Northeast region of the USA displaying at work the ten characteristics of servant leadership as defined by Spears? This study used an exploratory single-case study design and purposeful sampling techniques. The methodology consisted of in-depth, semistructured, open-ended interview with leaders from the community and employees from each of the various departments throughout City Hall. The key finding of this study revealed that four of the ten servant leadership characteristics as defined by Spears were dominant characteristics with regard to the mayor's leadership style: building community, commitment to the growth of people, empathy, and stewardship. The scope of this research was limited to the mayor of a metropolitan area in the Northeast region of the USA.*

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Top-Down Environment, Servant Leader Characteristics

For a very long time, top-down leadership has been a typical leadership style for hierarchical organizations (Rosener, 1990; Yukl, 2013); however, Martin, Rogers, Samuel, and Rowling (2017) proposed that a top-down leadership style might not be the best approach for organizations and leaders today. Greenleaf (1977) stated that leaders in numerous institutions are shifting away from the dominant leader. If Greenleaf and Martin et al. are correct, then it may be appropriate to include servant leadership as a viable leadership style for top-down hierarchical organizations. Spears (1995) pointed out that servant-leadership requires turning the traditional U.S. Corporate “pyramid” structure upside down, thus making it an inverted pyramid” (p 130). With that being said, large metropolitan areas are characterized by top-down bureaucratic structures and management styles (Grubnic & Woods, 2009). Therefore, this context should be suitable to study a mayor who seemed to use servant leadership methods. The lead author of this current study was familiar with the subject mayor and had personal experience in observing the mayor’s behavior.

The purpose of the study was to develop a better understanding of how leaders may use servant leadership characteristics while leading in organizations that have been thought of as being resistant to servant leadership. Additionally, this study showed how subordinates of a servant leader in a top-down organization viewed servant leadership in their hierarchical organization. The goal of this study was to provide insight into this important question and to lay a framework for future study. The researchers used Spears’ ten characteristics of servant leadership as the basis for our interviews with subordinates. We believe the answers from these interviews will be useful for current leaders and future researchers on this issue. We used a qualitative single-case study method to explore the servant leadership behaviors of a mayor of a metropolitan area in the Northeast United States of America to explore the servant leadership concept in a government environment by examining a mayor of a metropolitan area in the Northeast region of the USA who was purported to be a servant leader to answer the following research question:

To what extent, if any, is a mayor of a metropolitan area in the Northeast region of the United States displaying the ten characteristics of servant leadership as defined by Spears (1995)?

The case study method is appropriate since the presence of servant leadership in a hierarchical, top-down organization may imply that the servant leadership theory may need to show that servant leadership can work in hierarchical organizations. This study was part of a larger project, and while the findings are reported in this article, not all of the data is included due to space limitations. Additional information may be gained by contacting the corresponding author.

This study provides a good foundation for leaders searching for the impact servant leadership can have in a hierarchical organization. We believe it will provide information for governmental, military, and other top-down organizations. Further research in other such groups and with additional respondents from different organizations will likely lead to additional useful information for leaders.

## SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Greenleaf (1977) indicated that hierarchical, authoritarian leadership showcased the leader's power, servant leadership differed in that the servant leader was less concerned with power and more concerned about the needs of others. While servant leadership has been studied by researchers such as Greenleaf, Graham (1991), Spears (1995), Blanchard (1995), Laub (1999), Russell and Stone (2002), Sendjaya and Sarros (2002), Nelson (2003), Patterson (2003), Winston (2004), van Dierendonck (2011), McEachin (2011), Parris and Peachey (2013), and Winston and Fields (2015), a search of more than 100 studies in the ProQuest Academic Database and Google Scholar between 1970–2017 revealed a paucity of studies about servant leadership in a top-down culture with the exception of Earnhardt's (2008) study that explored servant leadership in the United States military; Bryant's (2003) dissertation that discussed government leaders displaying the attributes of servant leaders; Washington's (2015) study about servant leadership in government; along with Martin et al.'s (2017) study pertaining to serving from the top. The importance of this current study is its potential to give leaders and employees a more profound understanding of servant leadership in a government setting.

While the term servant leadership was first coined by Robert Greenleaf (Spears, 1995), the construct goes back to more than 2,000 years ago during biblical days according to Sendjaya and Sarros (2002). According to Yukl (2013), many studies emerged such as Graham (1991), whose study noted servant leaders' foci was on embedded autonomy and the moral growth of followers. A conceptual framework that was very helpful for understanding servant leadership was found in the ten characteristics of the servant leader described by Spears (1995).

### Spears's Ten Characteristics of Servant Leadership

According to Spears (1995), ten significant characteristics of servant leadership according to Greenleaf's writings include: (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) awareness, (e) persuasion, (f) conceptualization, (g) foresight, (h) stewardship, (i) commitment to the growth of people, and (j) community building. Spears' definition provided a foundation for this current study. Each of the ten characteristics is briefly defined as follows:

1. **Listening** – It is crucial for leaders to be more empathetic to the needs of their followers by becoming better listeners and to be more proactive when it comes to improving relationships with their followers. Furthermore, even though leaders are often recognized for how they converse with their subordinates, having an ear to listen is just as valuable and will strengthen relationships. Hence, a servant leader must exhibit the trait of being a good listener.
2. **Empathy** – Empathy is a trait a servant leader must embody so that he or she can identify with and make an effort to connect with others. For instance, an empathetic leader is one who intuitively detects what his counterparts or followers are feeling without necessarily

having a verbal exchange. Being an empathetic leader is likely to make one a more effective leader overall.

3. **Healing** – Another quality a servant leader may exhibit is that of a healer. Oftentimes, the workplace can be stressful, and workers may feel overwhelmed and discouraged—especially when they face challenges that may hinder their advancements. Consequently, it is vital that a servant leader reaches out to his or her followers to offer ways an organization can experience healing through unity and the genuine support of the one in charge.
4. **Awareness** – Self-awareness in a servant leader is important because one who leads must evaluate oneself to identify one's strengths and weaknesses, as well as ways to transform oneself, which will thereby benefit the organization at large.
5. **Persuasion** – Persuasion is a key element in the administration of a servant leader. Coercion, however, is a practice that can be detrimental to a work environment. Hence, a servant leader is encouraged to seek consensus from staff through persuasion as opposed to coercion.
6. **Conceptualization** – Conceptual thinking sets the servant leader apart, as it enables him or her to see beyond the tangible. In other words, it is important to see the big picture—a perspective that takes the servant leader beyond the daily operational approach. For many leaders, the art of conceptualization is a challenge that takes time and practice to master.
7. **Foresight** – Foresight is a fundamental characteristic of a servant leader because it allows the leader to see things not only from a current or historical viewpoint but with an eye to the future.
8. **Stewardship** – One very important component of servant leadership is stewardship because it shows that the leader is devoted to ensuring that the needs of others are being represented. Furthermore, a leader that practices good stewardship builds trust with those he or she leads.
9. **Commitment to the growth of people** – A servant leader is one whose job is partly to contribute to the growth of others. Therefore, the development of individuals who work in the facility must be an important factor in the assessment of the servant leader.
10. **Building community** – Building community is integral to the success of a servant leader. Consequently, notable servant leaders aim to recognize methods that bring positive results pertaining to the development of their organizations. They want to see the cohesiveness of their communities, which is the result of thoughtful leadership and great collaboration.

## METHOD

We used an exploratory single-case study design and purposeful sampling techniques to collect qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, archival data, and direct observation. For the analysis, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step guidelines. According to Yin (2013), a single-case study is a case study organized around a single exemplar. Yin also stated that a case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context" (p. 16).

We collected primary data from community partners and employees from various departments at City Hall who were purposely chosen to ensure participants in the study represented the phenomenon under investigation and addressed the research aim. Yin (2013) posited that a very significant source of case study evidence is the interview. Given the purpose and exploratory nature of this study, we conducted open-ended interviews with semi-structured questions at a mutually acceptable time and location. We continued to collect data until saturation occurred, as per Bowen's (2008) statement that data saturation happens when repetition of the data has occurred, and no new knowledge is being obtained. In addition to the interviews we used observations of the mayor at four local community events at and we reviewed 10 documents available to the public as a means of triangulation.

### Interview Questions Derived from the Literature

From Greenleaf's (1977) definition of servant leadership and his best test of servant leadership we developed the following two interview questions:

- What makes a leader a servant? (Interview Question 1)
- To what extent, if any, is the mayor helping others to grow, become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous? (Interview Question 2)

From Spears's (1995) ten characteristics of servant leadership we asked interviewees:

- What characteristics of leadership are important to the mayor and why? (Interview Question 5)
- How does the mayor implement the ten characteristics (listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community) associated with servant leadership? (Interview Question 6)

Focusing on the characteristics of servant leadership, Laub (1999) conducted a study to "collect, from the literature and a panel of experts, an agreed-upon list of the characteristics of servant leadership, and to develop an instrument for assessing the level at which leaders and workers perceive that these characteristics are displayed in their organizations or teams" (p. 6). The results of Laub's research generated six characteristics of servant leadership: (a) developing people, (b) sharing leadership, (c) displaying authenticity, (d) valuing people, (e) providing leadership, and (f) building community. Laub's study also generated the Servant Organizational Leadership Assessment Instrument. Laub was noted for developing the first assessment instrument to measure the level of servant leadership. Laub's study led to the following interview question:

- Do leaders today exhibit the characteristics of servant leadership? (Interview Question 3)

Patterson (2003) introduced a theoretical model of servant leadership that included the following virtuous constructs: (a) agápao love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, and (g) service. According to Patterson (2003), servant leadership is a “leadership style that provides a whole new understanding of leadership, by defining the heart of leadership as a focus on the well-being of followers” (p. 3). Patterson further added that virtues are inherently moral features that a servant leader exhibits, which ultimately work to enhance the common good of the community. This concept is viable to the premise behind servant leadership thereby providing some insights into this theoretical model. From Patterson’s work, we added the following interview question:

- What leadership characteristics do you believe a follower of a servant leader should value in his or her leader? (Interview Question 7)

Winston (2004) added to Patterson’s model showing how servant leadership concepts impact employees’ decisions to serve the servant leader. Winston conducted a case study to research the attitudes of employees toward their leader to assess if the leader was a servant. The researchers derived the following interview question from Winston’s work:

- How would you describe the servant leadership approach that you have experienced at work if any? (Interview Question 4)

## **Data Collection**

We interviewed 13 participants with saturation occurring at ten, but we interviewed three more to confirm that we achieved saturation. We conducted interviews based on the availability of each participant. The entire process of interviews took three weeks to complete. While each interview was scheduled for 45 minutes, most of the interviews lasted 30-35 minutes in length. We conducted 12 interviews face-to-face and one by phone due to the participant traveling at the time we collected data. The questions were open-ended, allowing the participants to share their perspectives on the subject matter and to ask for further clarity when applicable. Only two of the participants wanted further clarification. To ensure anonymity, we concealed the participants’ identities.

The participants comprised of (a) three cabinet members of the mayor’s current senior leadership team, (b) two midlevel staff who currently work at City Hall, (c) a frontline employee currently working at City Hall, (d) a local CEO who owns several businesses in a metropolitan area in the Northeast region of the USA, (e) an executive director of a community organization in the metropolitan area, (f) an administrator at an educational facility in a metropolitan area in the Northeast region of the USA, (g) a former cabinet member of the mayor’s senior leadership team, (h) a clergy member in the metropolitan area, (i) a community social worker/former campaign volunteer, and (j) a manager of a not-for-profit organization in the metropolitan area.

## Responses to the Interview Questions

In this section, we summarize the findings. More extensive excerpts from the interviews are available from the corresponding author. For each interview question, we provide two excerpts (with codes in brackets), as examples, followed by categories and each category's codes.

### Question 1: What Makes a Leader a Servant?

This question sought to understand if the people who are working for the mayor, as well as those who interact with her, understand the concept of servant leadership. Two excerpt examples are:

The executive director responded:

Leaders are servants when they place the needs of their followers before them [putting others first]. I am familiar with servant leadership because we practice it [awareness]. Leaders are servant based on the work they have done [competency].

The educational administrator stated:

A servant leader is someone who gives of himself [altruism]. It is someone who is selfless as opposed to being selfish [altruism]. Servant leaders consider decisions that impact people [altruism] and make sure they do not experience negativity with decisions being made [stewardship].

There were 18 different codes for question one. We clustered the codes together into three categories: (a) focusing on others—comprised of the following codes: servant, putting others first, altruism, empathy, listening and committed to the growth of others; (b) sense of community—comprised of the following codes: stewardship, modeling, advocacy, awareness, competency, partnering, building community, and conceptualization; and (c) spirituality—comprised of the following codes: caring, acceptance, humility, and higher calling.

### Question 2: To What Extent, if any, is the Mayor Helping Others to Grow, Become Healthier, Wiser, Freer, and More Autonomous?

This question sought to understand the impact the mayor is having on the employees who work for her in City Hall as well as those in the community who interact with her regularly. There was a myriad of replies to Question 2. Two excerpt examples are:

The executive director stated:

The mayor provides several opportunities [opportunity] for people to grow [committed to the growth of others] and for wisdom to develop [wisdom]. She creates autonomy [autonomous] through opportunities [opportunity]. She helps them to grow [committed to the growth of others] and become wiser [wisdom] by providing opportunities to succeed or fail [opportunity]. She makes it clear how to achieve the opportunity [opportunity]. She makes

them wiser [wisdom] because she allows them to learn from their mistakes [empowerment].

The educational administrator indicated:

She makes them healthier [healthier] through different initiatives, especially the early childhood. Also, Ban the Box helps people to grow and become employed [committed to the growth of others]. It also helps the family and builds community [building community]. Through her poverty initiative, she is helping folks to become freer [freer] and more autonomous [autonomous].

There were 22 different codes for question two. We clustered the codes into three categories: (a) becoming wiser—comprised of awareness, wisdom, autonomous, healthier, competency, higher calling, conceptualization, and freer; (b) dedicated to the growth of others—comprised of putting others first, servant, modeling, empowerment, exposure, partnering, empathy, advocacy, committed to the growth of others, and caring; (c) providing opportunities—comprised of opportunity, persuasion, transparency, and building community.

### **Question 3: Do Leaders Today Exhibit the Characteristics of Servant Leadership at Work?**

This question sought to understand the kind of characteristics displayed by leaders today. There were a variety of responses to Question 3. Two excerpt examples are:

The social worker/campaign volunteer posited:

Some of the leaders do, and some of them don't [disparity]. Those who are servants [servant] are doing more for the people [putting others first] and not getting anything out of it for themselves [altruism].

The business CEO indicated:

Not really [not exhibited]! There is a different requirement for different jurisdiction [disparity]. In an affluent society, people are more self-sufficient [autonomous]. In this city, there is a huge disadvantage [disparity] because of the poverty issues and people on the top making decisions that benefit them [self-interest].

There were 30 codes for question three. We clustered the codes into four categories: (a) exhibiting servant leadership—comprised of servant, servant leadership, putting others first, listening, autonomous, conceptualization, altruism, higher power, divinely motivated, chosen, as well as committed to the growth of others; (b) effective leadership—comprised of effective, competency, productivity, composure, passion, being supportive, follower, visibility, transformation, desire for improvement, and notable; (c) not subscribing to servant leadership—comprised of not exhibited, unusual, conflict, and disparity; and (d) self-interest—comprised of distancing, disparity, apathy, and self-interest.



#### **Question 4: How Would You Describe the Servant Leadership Approach That You Have Experienced at Work if Any?**

This question sought to understand if the employees who work for the mayor, as well as those who interact with her, have experienced servant leadership. There were a variety of responses to Question 4. Two excerpt examples are:

The social worker/campaign volunteer indicated:

I see servant leadership style daily [displaying servant characteristics]. People know that they are not going to make a lot of money [awareness]. They are in the field to help and serve the people [servant].

The business CEO stated:

I am involved in fundraising for the mayor's ball [partnering]. She is a giver [giving]. She wants everyone to come to the ball and participate at all levels [inclusion], so she is always giving out free tickets [giving]. She is very aware [awareness] of the people who can't afford to pay for the ball [empathy]. She has a lot of empathy for everybody in the community [empathy].

There were 27 codes for question four. We divided the codes into three categories: (a) servant leadership—comprised of servant, healing, awareness, empathy, humility, wisdom, discipleship, higher power, servant leadership, and stewardship; (b) development—comprised of conceptualization, innovative, competency, opportunity, communication skills, listening, partnering, inclusion, and valuing others' input; and (c) assisting others—comprised of altruism, giving, setting the example, committed to the growth of others, caring, being supportive, empowerment, and guidance.

#### **Question 5: What Characteristics of Leadership are Important to the Mayor and Why?**

This question sought to answer the characteristics that the employees who work for the mayor and those who interact with her often think are important to her. There were a variety of responses to Question 5. Two excerpt examples are:

The former cabinet member stated:

The mayor tagline is we get things done [productivity]. She is all about listening [listening]. What makes her different is she does something about it [productivity]. Customer service is one of her main priorities. She started the Office of Constituent Services [conceptualization] which is an initiative to listen to her constituents [listening]. She empathized because she has been there [empathy]. Building community is very important to her [building community].

Cabinet member #1 said:

The mayor is bright and energetic [competency]. I love working for her [enthusiasm]. Her default answer is to find me the one way we can get it done [productivity]. This is refreshing [enthusiasm]. She holds people accountable [accountability]. She is committed to the growth of others

[committed to the growth of others] and building community [building community]. She is a listener [listening], ambitious and willing to get her hands dirty [productivity]. This is very motivating [enthusiasm].

There were 26 different codes for question five. We clustered the codes into four categories: (a) being productive—comprised of productivity, competency, communication skills, determination, foresight, impactful, conceptualization, enthusiasm, persuasion, and building community; (b) putting others first—comprised of altruism, putting others first, servant, committed to the growth of others, and divinely motivated; (c) modeling—comprised of straightforward, loyal, accountability, dependability, trustworthiness, humility, and setting the example; and (d) responsiveness—comprised of welcoming, listening, empathy, and caring.

**Question 6: How Does the Mayor Implement the Ten Characteristics (Listening, Empathy, Healing, Awareness, Persuasion, Conceptualization, Foresight, Stewardship, Commitment to the Growth of People, and Building Community) Associated with Servant Leadership?**

This question sought to understand which of the ten characteristics as pointed out by Spears (1995) the mayor is implementing. There were a variety of responses to Question 6. Two excerpt examples are:

The clergy member indicated:

She listens to the people [listening]. She is a servant leader by being upfront [servant] by not running from problems. She has great foresight [foresight]. Her vision is not just plowing ahead [foresight] but also entails embracing where we come from. Empathy is part of leadership [empathy]. She is aware that she is part of the community [awareness]. She is a good steward because the city is fiscally responsible [stewardship]. She goes to [redacted] to lobby for this city [persuasion]. She hired the top cop of the nation to help with crime. She is committed to the growth of others [committed to the growth others]. She reached back and pulled her community with her [building community].

The former cabinet member stated:

She set a vehicle in City Hall for people to speak and for her to listen [seeking input]. She has empathy for the majority of citizens [empathy]. She is driven by her faith [divinely motivated]. I have seen her console families [healing] and listen to homeless people in distress [caring]. She is aware of everything in the city [awareness]. She persuades CEOs to hire people [persuasion]. She implements initiatives that will be beneficial in 20 years [foresight]. She is committed to the growth of others [committed to the growth others]. She builds community through the Books and Bears initiative [building community].

There were 25 codes for question six. We clustered the codes together according to similarity in three categories: (a) hope—comprised of seeking input,

being supportive, opportunity, empowerment, partnering, exposure, caring, and divinely motivated; (b) implementing servant leadership—comprised of building community, servant leadership, healing, empathy, listening, conceptualization, persuasion, stewardship, committed to the growth of others, foresight, awareness, and servant; (c) citizenship—comprised of advocacy, inclusion, competency, setting the example, and trustworthiness.

### **Question 7: What Leadership Characteristics Do You Believe a Follower of a Servant Leader Should Value in His or Her Leader?**

This question sought to answer the characteristics a follower of a servant leader should value. There were a variety of responses to Question 7. Two excerpt examples are:

Cabinet member #3 responded:

A leader you can emulate [setting the example]. The principle that you are not too good to do whatever is needed [humility] to get the work done on behalf of the people [valuing people]. If they work hard, then you work hard [setting the example]. Hard work [productivity], thinking of the people you serve [servant], being fiscally wise [stewardship], a heart for the people especially in government during these times [stewardship].

Midlevel staff #1 postulated:

I value integrity [integrity], listening [listening], and empowerment [empowerment]. I will follow the mayor because she is about dignity, integrity, respect [trustworthiness], and doing the right thing not only for herself [altruism], her family but also for the community [building community].

There were 28 codes for question seven. We clustered the codes according to their similarity in four categories: (a) compassion—comprised of valuing people, welcoming, inclusion, servant, humility, giving, listening, empathy, and altruism. (b) stewardship—comprised of productivity, awareness, stewardship, confidence, foresight, communication skills, understanding, and conceptualization; (c) credible leader—comprised of setting the example, competency, loyal, trustworthiness, integrity, and being straightforward; and (d) empowerment—comprised of guidance, being supportive, empowerment, persuasion, and committed to the growth of others.

### **Observations**

On one day in January, the mayor attended several celebrations in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King. In one of her speeches, she addressed economic disparities in the community [addressing the disparity] and the need to provide opportunities [opportunity] for its people. The mayor also addressed the importance of building community [building community] and representing all of the citizens of the city [inclusion]. Building a better community was a common theme in her speech and repeated at least five times during her discussion. Other speeches on that day were similar. She elaborated on the importance of providing better educational

opportunities [opportunity]. She also expounded on the importance of building safer and vibrant neighborhoods [building community] while helping people to move from poverty to self-sufficiency [autonomous].

In a recent community event administered by the local housing authority, which was celebrating its first community center café, the mayor served food to all attendees before going around to greet everyone.

A community member recently started a local radio show. She invited the mayor to be a guest on her show. The mayor agreed to be a guest speaker, knowing that this new radio show may not have a lot of listeners [being supportive]. She thought it was important to provide the same opportunity [opportunity] to this community member as she has given to other more popular radio stations.

During another community event, she spoke of empowering the poor [empowerment]. She stated, “When they do better, we all do better.” She also encouraged healing between the races [healing]. She said, “When we become successful; it is our duty to reach back and give back to the community” [giving].

The last event where the mayor was being observed took place in Albany at the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus. Attendees approached her table every few minutes to exchange greetings [welcoming]. Although she was eating, she stopped to listen [attentiveness] and take pictures with them [welcoming].

In the observations, we identified 13 codes. We clustered the codes into two categories: (a) well-being of others—comprised of addressing the disparity, opportunity, building community, giving, empowerment, healing, servant, and autonomous; and (b) being supportive—comprised of welcoming, listening, attentiveness, inclusion, and being supportive.

### **Archival Data**

Publicly available articles, speech transcripts, and news releases provided the archival information. Ten articles were analyzed:

1. *[REDACTED] Announces New Office of Community Wealth Building [REDACTED]*.
2. *[REDACTED] 2014-2015 Budget Address City of [REDACTED]*
3. *[REDACTED], Inaugurated, Will Focus on Jobs, Economic Equality [REDACTED]*.
4. *[REDACTED] Cruises to Second Term as [REDACTED] Mayor [REDACTED]*
5. *Woodshop Help Students, Community [REDACTED]*
6. *[REDACTED] Actively Engaged on Education [REDACTED]*
7. *[REDACTED] to Announce Local International Deaf Awareness Week Events [REDACTED]*
8. *NY Democrats Present [REDACTED] With “Bridge Builder” Award at DNC [REDACTED]*
9. *Build the Future [REDACTED]*
10. *The Inaugural Address of Mayor [REDACTED] City of [REDACTED]*

We coded the articles with 25 different codes. We clustered the codes into three categories: (a) managing change—comprised of communication skills, foresight, conceptualization, change, actively engaged, enthusiasm, and bridge builder; (b) understanding the needs of others—comprised of listening, awareness, persuasion, serving, being supportive, understanding the needs of others, hope, committed to the growth of others, healing, and giving back; (c) ensuring economic equality—comprised of inclusion, building community, opportunity, stewardship, economic equality, empowerment, accountability, and advocacy.

## DISCUSSION

In this single-case study, we employed an exploratory qualitative methodology to collect in-depth interview information from a purposeful population and to explore the concept of servant leadership in a top-down environment based on Greenleaf's (1977) theory of servant leadership, and as identified by Spears (1995). The main research question of this study was: To what extent, if any, is a mayor of a metropolitan area in the Northeast region of the United States displaying, at work, the 10 characteristics of servant leadership as defined by Spears? We grouped a number of codes together to create the 28 diverse categories. Subsequently, we grouped the categories together to generate themes that answered the research question and addressed the purpose of the study. We found seven themes: building community—comprised of sense of community, providing opportunities, managing change, being productive, and development; (b) commitment to the growth of people— comprised of assisting others, dedicated to the growth of others, empowerment, and being supportive; (c) displaying servant leadership— comprised of exhibiting servant leadership, implementing servant leadership, becoming wiser, servant leadership, and spirituality; (d) altruism— comprised of focusing on others, putting others first, and well-being of others; (e) top-down leadership— comprised of self-interest, and not subscribing to servant leadership; (f) stewardship—comprised of effective leadership, stewardship, citizenship modeling, and credible leader; and (g) empathy— comprised of understanding the needs of others, compassion, responsiveness, hope, and ensuring economic equality. Table 1 presents the theme, categories, and code.

Table 1: Summary of Themes, Categories, and Codes

Themes	Categories	Codes
Building Community	Sense of Community	stewardship, modeling, advocacy, awareness, competency, partnering, building community, and conceptualization
	Providing Opportunities	opportunity, persuasion, transparency, and building community

Themes	Categories	Codes
	Managing Change	communication skills, foresight, conceptualization, change, actively engaged, enthusiasm, and bridge builder
	Being Productive	productivity, competency, communication skills, determination, foresight, impactful, conceptualization, enthusiasm, persuasion, and building community
	Development	conceptualization, innovative, competency, opportunity, communication skills, listening, partnering, inclusion, and valuing others' input
Commitment to the Growth of People	Assisting Others	altruism, giving, setting the example, committed to the growth of others, caring, being supportive, empowerment, and guidance
	Dedicated to the Growth of Others	putting others first, servant, modeling, empowerment, exposure, partnering, empathy, advocacy, committed to the growth of others, and caring
	Empowerment	guidance, being supportive, empowerment, persuasion, and

Themes	Categories	Codes
		committed to the growth of others
	Being Supportive	welcoming, listening, attentiveness, inclusion, and being supportive
Displaying Servant Leadership	Exhibiting Servant Leadership	servant, servant leadership, putting others first, listening, autonomous, conceptualization, altruism, higher power, divinely motivated, chosen, as well as committed to the growth of others
	Implementing Servant Leadership	building community, servant leadership, healing, empathy, listening, conceptualization, persuasion, stewardship, committed to the growth of others, foresight, awareness, and servant
	Becoming Wiser	of awareness, wisdom, autonomous, healthier, competency, higher calling, conceptualization, and freer
	Servant Leadership	servant, healing, awareness, empathy, humility, wisdom, discipleship, higher power, servant leadership, and stewardship

Themes	Categories	Codes
	Spirituality	caring, acceptance, humility, and higher calling
Altruism	Focusing on Others	servant, putting others first, altruism, empathy, listening and committed to the growth of others
	Putting Others First	altruism, putting others first, servant, committed to the growth of others, and divinely motivated
	Well-being of Others	addressing the disparity, opportunity, building community, giving, empowerment, healing, servant, and autonomous
Top-Down Leadership	Self-Interest	distancing, disparity, apathy, and self-interest
	Not Subscribing to Servant Leadership	not exhibited, unusual, conflict, and disparity
Stewardship	Effective Leadership	effective, competency, productivity, composure, passion, being supportive, follower, visibility, transformation, desire for improvement, and notable
	Stewardship	productivity, awareness, stewardship, confidence, foresight, communication skills, understanding, and conceptualization
	Citizenship Modeling	advocacy, inclusion, competency, setting the example, and trustworthiness.



Themes	Categories	Codes
	Credible Leader	setting the example, competency, loyal, trustworthiness, integrity, and being straightforward
Empathy	Understanding the Needs of Others	listening, awareness, persuasion, serving, being supportive, understanding the needs of others, hope, committed to the growth of others, healing, and giving back
	Compassion	valuing people, welcoming, inclusion, servant, humility, giving, listening, empathy, and altruism
	Responsiveness	welcoming, listening, empathy, and caring
	Hope	seeking input, being supportive, opportunity, empowerment, partnering, exposure, caring, and divinely motivated
	Ensuring Economic Equality	inclusion, building community, opportunity, stewardship, economic equality, empowerment, accountability, and advocacy

The results show that four of the ten servant leadership characteristics, as defined by Spears (1995), were principal attributes pertaining to the mayor's leadership style. They were: (a) building community, (b) commitment to the growth of people, (c) empathy, and (d) stewardship. The results also show that altruism was another central trait of the mayor's behavior. Displaying servant leadership and top-down leadership were the two remaining themes. For further understanding, we highlight the seven attributes below.

### **Building Community**

Servant leadership as a theory needs a community to manifest its significance. Therefore, building community is integral to the pervasiveness and effectiveness of this method. The mayor understands the significance of this practice and exhibits this through tangible behaviors. When questioned, many of the participants emphasized that the mayor appreciates community building and serves as a role model for others.

### **Commitment to the Growth of People**

An effective leader is committed to developing others. Hence, this theme demonstrated the importance for leaders to encourage growth. Most all of the participants identified the mayor's commitment to seeing others grow as one of the best attributes of her leadership. Based on the findings the mayor is people-centered and because of her commitment both the community and society at large are evolving.

### **Displaying Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership was a major theme in this study. This recurrent theme was conspicuous when a large number of the participants depicted the mayor playing the role of a servant as opposed to that of a leader. For example, several cabinet members reflected that the mayor often assists her staff whenever and wherever necessary and that has had a profound impact on her staff and other notable employees who have been observing closely. An executive staff member commented that the mayor certainly embodies some of the characteristics of a servant leader.

### **Altruism**

This theme showed several of the participants concurred that the mayor is very altruistic, especially with her concern for putting others before her own needs. The executive director, educational administrator, and cabinet member #1 stated that the mayor has no hidden agenda. Her desire is to help everyone become self-sufficient. They also mentioned that the mayor values poor people the same way she values rich people. As a result, she is shaping the city through her altruistic approach.

### **Top-Down Leadership**

The results of this research demonstrate that the top-down approach to leadership is fallible to a great extent. The notion of a leader having a singular voice in the workplace is quickly disintegrating. This approach is seen as oppressive, as it only benefits leaders and not the employees, as indicated by midlevel staff #2. Unlike the traditional approach, there seemingly is a role reversal whereby the servant leader takes the place of the employee and vice versa as pointed out by the frontline employee, the manager, social worker/campaign volunteer, and cabinet-member #2.

## Stewardship

Several participants including a clergy member, the former cabinet member and cabinet member #2 labeled the mayor as being a good steward who cares for everyone. This theme demonstrated that the mayor understands the importance of being responsible for the whole city. Her desire is to ensure that she leaves the city better than she found it by contributing to the greater good of society. Because of her approach, several participants highlighted that many staff were following in her footsteps and making wise decisions that continue to benefit everyone.

## Empathy

This theme is crucial for a leader to be a servant. Many of the participants such as the educational administrator noted that the mayor showed empathy by ending the red light camera violations initiatives in the city that were negatively impacting poor people. Cabinet member #2 stated that the mayor is the people's mayor. She can relate to them. She understands how being empathic is important for a mayor to be successful. Almost all of the participants mentioned that what the mayor experienced when she was younger prepared her for the current position and made her very compassionate.

Based on the ten characteristics of servant leadership as identified by Spears (1995), four characteristics -- empathy, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community -- surfaced noticeably as themes as part of the mayor's leadership style. That being said, it is vital to acknowledge that the other six characteristics -- listening, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, and foresight -- were obvious, as highlighted previously in this study. The aforementioned six characteristics emerged as codes that developed into categories and subsequently advanced into themes.

## Implications

This study demonstrated the growing significance of servant leadership in organizations, specifically in government. Therefore, some of the implications pertain to professional development and how to maneuver in positions such as mayor. In the current state of the country and the world, knowing and being equipped with a suitable leadership style is important to being effective and successful. The results of this qualitative study will help leaders in business, academia, and government to better comprehend the servant leadership concept and how they can apply it. This is the first study that explored a mayor's leadership style in a top-down environment based on Greenleaf's (1977) theory of servant leadership and as defined by Spears (1995). Hence, this study offers a wealth of new information that provides a new perspective on servant leadership in a top-down environment.

This study revealed the mayor is using a servant leadership approach when she is leading the city and interacting with her employees and community members, and that the people are receptive to this approach. This is an important discovery given Rosener's (1990) statement that the expected leadership style in

hierarchical organizations would not be servant leadership. This study also demonstrated that the participants were happy with the mayor's leadership style, which is crucial information because it shows that the practice of servant leadership in agencies such as City Hall is not only happening but being accepted. Based on the negative feedback toward the traditional top-down leadership approach, it is clear there is a need for leaders with servant attributes. This study provides a great opportunity for scholars to expand upon this research and provide additional information on the servant leadership concept.

### **Limitations**

Although this study makes significant contributions to the scholarly literature, there were several limitations associated with the study. First, this study was limited to just one mayor of a metropolitan area in the Northeastern United States, and the data were gathered from participants in this region only. The results might have revealed more if participants outside of this region were included in the data. In addition, the current study was also limited because it used purposeful sampling.

The lead author was familiar with the selected mayor, and we cannot rule out possible bias. We do not believe that there was bias because the lead author simply knew of the mayor and did not have personal interaction with the mayor.

### **Future Research**

The present study offers a number of suggestions for future research that can expand the current study of servant leadership. Since this study was based on one region of the United States, future scholars can study other mayors and governors in other areas of the country using similar methods to discover if the themes highlighted in the current study are similar in other regions. Because it is clear that the studied mayor is practicing many of the attributes of servant leadership, future scholars can study the impact of practicing those attributes in a government setting. Finally, a similar study can use control variables, such as age, education, and socioeconomic status, to discover additional relevant information on the servant leadership phenomenon.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore servant leadership in a top-down environment based on Greenleaf's (1977) theory of servant leadership as defined by Spears (1995) through an exploratory single-case study. Since saturation happened quicker than anticipated, we only used 13 participants. Seven themes surfaced in the study -- four of which originated from the 10 servant leadership characteristics named by Spears. This study adds values to the servant leadership concept because it further confirms the importance of the concept to employees across the spectrum in agencies such as City Hall.

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