



# The Relationship Between Superintendent Servant Leadership Behavior and Principal Job Satisfaction in Iowa

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## **Abstract**

*Data from recent studies indicate that school principal turnover is high and that some principals suggest low job satisfaction levels. Superintendent leadership can influence the job satisfaction level of principals. This study examined the extent to which superintendent servant leadership behaviors correlate with principal job satisfaction. The population included all public school principals in the state. The final sample size consisted of 312 principals. The study utilized two survey instruments to explore superintendent servant leadership characteristics and job satisfaction data. The servant leadership characteristics included accountability, authenticity, courage, empowerment, forgiveness, humility, standing back, and stewardship. Questions investigating principal job satisfaction were broken into intrinsic and extrinsic subcategories. Results indicated a statistically significant relationship between superintendent servant leadership behavior and overall principal job satisfaction. Data also showed statistically significant relationships between each of the eight servant leadership characteristics and overall principal job satisfaction.*

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Job Satisfaction, School Superintendent, School Principal

School districts in the United States replace approximately 20 percent of the population of school principals on a yearly basis (Goldring & Taie, 2014). A recent MetLife study indicated that 41 percent of school principals reported job dissatisfaction and approximately one-third of principals said they were likely to leave their principalship to pursue a different profession in the near future (Goode, 2017).

The decline of principal job satisfaction has the possibility of negatively impacting the retention of qualified and quality principals, which is a concern for districts that strive to retain their building administrators. A study by Fuller and Young (2009) found that nearly 70 percent of new high school principals leave their positions within five years of the start of their initial principal job.

The role of the school principal has changed due to a variety of factors. Principals feel the weight of their responsibilities and bear the burden of the stresses that accompany them (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2003). While some of the factors that influence principal job satisfaction are outside of the control of the superintendent, the superintendent's leadership may have some influence on principal job satisfaction.

The impact of the principal on student achievement may be relatively indirect as compared to a teacher, but the principal is a key component to an effective school and to the success of students (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Researchers agree that principals are an integral part of the accomplishment of schools, and the decisions they make influence the policies, practices, and procedures that impact student success.

While the impact that a principal has on the school has been noted, a recent report indicates that principal turnover is disruptive to the school community. According to Van Cleef (2015), principal turnover negatively impacts student achievement, the rebuilding of positive momentum within the building with a new principal takes significant time, and it takes years for a principal to make meaningful change in a school.

Studies focused on transformational, instructional, and transactional leadership in the public and private sector have resulted in a large amount of information related to effective leadership. In addition, some studies have assessed the level of job satisfaction of contemporary principals. Servant leadership, however, has not been studied to the extent to which those aforementioned leadership styles have (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2003), nor has the relationship between servant leadership characteristics of superintendents and the job satisfaction level of their principals been researched thoroughly.

While the principalship is a stressful profession due to a variety of uncontrollable factors, it would be beneficial if principals held a positive outlook on their job. The behavior of the superintendent as the primary leader of the principal is a factor that is manageable. If superintendents were able to use their leadership tools and characteristics in reflective practice and to provide targeted support and motivation for their principals,

perhaps the job satisfaction of principals would increase. In an effort to help both superintendents and principals succeed, this study focused on principal job satisfaction and its relationship with the servant leadership characteristics of their superintendents.

Leadership impacts the climate, culture, and function of any organization. Research provides information that indicates correlations between effective leadership and organizational efficacy (DeAngelis & White, 2011; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; White, Brown, Hunt, & Klostermann, 2011). Schools are included among organizations that benefit from quality leadership. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) highlighted several areas linked to leadership in schools, including climate, clarity in mission and goals, teacher attitudes, classroom practices and procedures, instruction and curricular organization, and the ability of students to effectively access their education.

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which superintendents' servant leadership behaviors relate to the job satisfaction of principals. It examined the extent to which the job satisfaction level of principals correlates to the specified superintendent servant leadership characteristics. This study also determined which of the servant leadership characteristics are most highly related to principal job satisfaction.

Determining how superintendent servant leadership factors can impact the job satisfaction of their principals may be beneficial in a variety of ways. This information could be helpful to district leaders who want to provide optimal conditions for their principals to be satisfied with their jobs. The results could be used as data for individual reflection and growth for district superintendents. Increased superintendent capacity in and usage of servant leadership characteristics could potentially reduce job dissatisfaction among principals, which may help provide organizational stability that comes with principal retention and satisfaction. Potentially, this would reduce costs affiliated with job turnover as well as provide conditions for building personnel and students to succeed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

When attempting to determine the relationship between superintendent servant leadership characteristics and principal job satisfaction, the researchers viewed this study through the lens of Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and the Job Characteristic Model.

### **Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation**

In 1943, Abraham Maslow published *A Theory of Motivation*, which categorized and explained human motivational factors. This work was used to create a hierarchy that provided a framework for pinpointing the individual needs of people and for use in determining the needs that must be fulfilled in order for people to become more satisfied and to begin focusing on other areas of need. Maslow's (1943, p. 372) emphasis was on formulating a positive theory of motivation and he was interested in determining the factors that helped lead to individual personal satisfaction.

At the most basic level, Maslow determined that there are several human physiological needs that are pre-requisites for further satisfaction. As the physiological needs are satisfied, other needs begin to emerge that become more complex. Safety needs are the next level in the hierarchy.

Once basic physiological and safety needs are met, additional needs begin to emerge. Social needs, which include love, acceptance, friendship, and social belonging are the next level in the hierarchy. After social needs, the next level of the hierarchy is esteem needs. Esteem needs are the requirement for appreciation and respect. Combined, the esteem and social levels make up the psychological need portion of the hierarchy.

The peak of Maslow's hierarchy comes when people have their physiological and psychological needs met. Once this occurs, individuals are able to focus on self-actualization. People who are self-actualized are concerned with their own growth, are self-aware, are reflective, and are interested in reaching their own full potential.

Maslow highlighted what he described as weaknesses in previous motivation theories: that they did not focus on what actually motivates people. Maslow also advised that, while his hierarchy was easy to understand, it would be hazardous to over-simplify it.

### **Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory**

While Maslow's theory of human motivation is accepted as the basis for future motivation theory, it does not have targeted connections to the workplace. Fredrick Herzberg utilized portions of Maslow's theory to develop a theory that connected more closely to job satisfaction and work-motivation research. Herzberg theorized that a certain set of factors produce job satisfaction and increased motivation, while a separate set leads to job dissatisfaction and reduced motivation.

Herzberg stated that some hygiene factors may lead to job dissatisfaction. These hygiene factors include salary, fringe benefits, work conditions, job security, status within the organization, policies and practices, co-workers and supervision (Herzberg, 1987, p. 8). He believed that a lack of these extrinsic factors can cause employee dissatisfaction.

Herzberg stated that there are motivator factors that lead to job satisfaction in the workplace. Motivators include recognition for achievement, challenging work, meaningful work, input into decision making, responsibility within an organization, and a sense of importance to an organization (Herzberg, 1987, p. 8).

There are other theoretical approaches to motivation affecting the workplace. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, however, is the most well-known (Aziri, 2011, p. 81). While some researchers believe there are inadequacies in the Two-Factor Theory, it aligns with Maslow's hierarchy and is a widely accepted and used workplace motivational theory. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory will be used in this study.

## **Job Characteristic Model**

Work design and redesign started as a way to boost motivation through job enrichment. The Job Characteristic Model, created by J. Richard Hackman and Greg Oldham in 1975, suggested that some aspects of a job can create positive and negative outcomes of the performance of an employee. Hackman and Oldham (1975) indicated that job characteristics have a direct impact on the work-related attitudes of employees.

In the Job Characteristic Model, task variety, task identity, and task significance suggest an intrinsic sense of meaningfulness for the work of the employee. Autonomy leads to an employee's sense of responsibility and individual control. Feedback provides the response of information in regard to the work that an employee completes or attempts to complete.

## **Principal Job Satisfaction**

According to studies by Goldring and Taie (2014), job turnover among building principals has remained at approximately 20 percent annually over a consistent timeframe. Using that data, we can extrapolate that thousands of principals in the United States move positions or leave the profession each year. According to Markow, Macia, and Lee (2012), job satisfaction among principals has declined. Markow et al. (2012, pp. 33-34) indicated that nearly one-third of principals affirmed that they are likely to leave their principal position in the near future to pursue a different occupation; 41 percent reported dissatisfaction with their job responsibilities. Three-quarters of the principals shared that their role as school leader has become too complex for them and nearly half expressed that they are under a tremendous amount of stress several days a week or more. Fewer than half of the principals reported having autonomy and control over personnel decisions regarding teachers in their buildings or having control over building finances. These statistics indicate that there is a large population of principals who are not satisfied with their job or with some of the responsibilities of their role.

A study by Webb, Royal, and Nash (2015) provided additional data regarding job satisfaction among principals. It found that school principals are generally dissatisfied with hygiene factors such as the number of hours they work. They are dissatisfied with the amount of time they spend on tasks that they believe take time away from their primary job responsibility of improving student achievement. They are dissatisfied with the lack of time they are able to spend on tasks directly related to supporting student growth. A stated implication in this research study was that superintendents could increase principal satisfaction, principal retention, and student outcomes by providing the support principals need to focus on what the principals believe are their most important responsibilities.

Multiple factors impact the satisfaction level of principals. Extrinsic factors for consideration include salary and employment benefits, security, and advancement opportunities (Edmond, 2014; Markow, Macia, & Lee, 2012; Webb, Royal, & Nash, 2015). In addition, the changing roles and responsibilities of the principal have caused challenges. Some of these changes include increased instructional responsibilities, public

accountability measures, political components, changes in student demographics, and a lack of support from stakeholders (NCSL, 2002). Seventy-five percent of school administrators recognized that their role had become too complex (Markow, Macia, & Lee, 2012).

A study by Edmond (2014) investigated factors that lead to job satisfaction for principals as well as considerations that motivate them to stay in their profession. She identified several reasons for principal job dissatisfaction, which included administrative policies, workload, lack of funding, societal attitude, and a lack of proper physical space. However, principals who have the ability to develop and utilize their talents and skills have an increase in job satisfaction that leads to job retention (Sodoma & Else, 2009).

A principal is now measured through a complex multidimensional lens. A principal must navigate a variety of accountability measures while acting as an instructional and transformational leader (Webb et al., 2015). The principal must manage priorities that are often conflicting while trying to balance their time to focus on emergent issues. Combs, Edmonson, and Jackson (2009) discovered that principals leave the profession due to the enormous catalog of work-related job tasks and the lack of time to complete them in a timely manner during the work week.

### **Superintendent Support and Principal Job Satisfaction**

The literature cites superintendent support as a critical component to principal job satisfaction. Scholars have found that the support of principal autonomy from superintendents can mitigate the negative effects of job satisfaction that some principals experience (Chang, Leach, & Anderman, 2015). Further, Shaw, Firestone, Patterson, and Winston (2018) state that servant leadership can be a tool for growth “in situations when leadership role modeling is needed” (p. 16).

A study by Wang, Pollock, and Hauseman (2015) indicates that principals feel more satisfied with their day-to-day work when they feel more respected by their superintendent. Further, they state that appreciation expressed through recognizing and valuing the work of the principal is a component that can motivate principals to improve their work and can also increase job satisfaction.

Saiti and Fassoulis (2012) studied job satisfaction levels among school leaders and found that job satisfaction is higher when leaders receive targeted support and recognition from their superiors. The researchers discovered that cooperation and devotion between leaders and followers led to positive relationships. Further, they determined that the recognition and encouragement of principals were greater determinants of job satisfaction than traditional economic factors.

### **Introduction of Servant Leadership**

Robert Greenleaf introduced the concept of servant leadership through “The Servant as Leader” in 1970. In this essay, Greenleaf wrestled with whether the role of the

servant and the role of leader can be embodied in the same person simultaneously, using the central character from Hermann Hesse's fictional book *Journey of the East* as a case study of effective and ineffective leaders. The central character in Hesse's book was the servant of a group of men who were partaking on a pilgrimage. He was tasked with a variety of unskilled, physical, seemingly menial job responsibilities. The character supported the group of men faithfully through a portion of their journey, then disappeared from the pilgrimage. When he departed, the group fell into disarray and was unable to successfully continue their journey together. In the end, the narrator of the story had an epiphany that throughout the journey, the servant was actually the leader of the group. "The Servant as Leader" was a catalyst for the modern servant leadership movement. While Greenleaf's essay started the servant leadership crusade, it did not define servant leadership, define the key characteristics of servant leadership, or assign servant leadership as a new type of leadership model.

### **Characteristics of Servant Leadership**

Larry Spears utilized the concepts in Greenleaf's writings to operationalize servant leadership by providing definitions and delineating its characteristics. In 1995, he identified 10 characteristics of servant leadership that he believed were of critical importance to understanding the concept of servant leadership (Spears, 2010, p. 28). While several other authors have interpreted Greenleaf's writings and have organized the characteristics into various categories, the 10 characteristics that Spears developed include: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Spear's characteristics of servant leadership have been referenced by writers such as Bolman, Deal, Covey, Fullan, and others. The literature on servant leadership emphasizes the opportunities that servant leaders create to help followers grow; this relates closely to the upper levels of Maslow's hierarchy as well as Herzberg's beliefs about workplace motivators (von Fischer & De Jong, 2017). The 10 characteristics on which Larry Spears expounded were valuable in developing instruments for use in measuring servant leadership in organizations.

In a 2010 study, Dirk Van Dierendonck and Inge Nuijten developed a multi-dimensional servant leadership instrument by breaking down the results of a study of over 1,500 European leaders. The instrument, called the Servant Leadership Survey, measured the following eight dimensions of servant leadership: "standing back, humility, courage, empowerment, accountability, authenticity, forgiveness, and stewardship" (Van Dierendonck & Inge Nuijten, 2010, p. 249). The tool was an attempt to seek information regarding the components of servant leadership, be easy to apply, be valid, and be reliable. Since these eight dimensions of servant leadership support the research in this study, the following paragraphs provide descriptions of the servant leadership dimensions for use in providing a working understanding of each.

## **Accountability**

Accountability measures are a relatively new expectation for the educational systems of the United States. The No Child Left Behind Act and subsequent reauthorizations, along with legislation such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) placed an emphasis on the importance of public accountability regarding the responsibilities of the school. Legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Rehabilitation Act, the Disabilities Discrimination Act (DDA) and others have been utilized to hold educators accountable. While accountability in education is a relatively new phenomenon, there is a great historical context for why accountability is viewed as an important characteristic of effective leadership in the United States.

In the United States, the accountability of leaders has a large impact on the perceived effectiveness of those leaders by their followers. The culture of accountability that was woven into the founding of America has bled into the culture of other organizations, both public and private. Essounga-Njan and Morgan-Thomas (2010) completed a study that compared the citizens of the United States with those of France. The study concluded that Americans hold their leaders in higher regard if the leaders regularly hold themselves accountable. This is just one indicator of the importance of accountability as a leadership characteristic or requirement in the United States.

A contemporary explanation of accountability includes holding people accountable for the things in which they can control (Conger, 1987). Such a definition helps to ensure that individuals and teams in an organization know what is expected of them and how their performance will be measured. Accountability measures can provide boundaries and opportunities for goal setting (Spears, 2010).

## **Authenticity**

Leaders who are authentic allow their personal self to emerge at the forefront of their professional self by expressing themselves in ways that are consistent with their inner thoughts and values (Spears, 2010). Authenticity is characterized by keeping promises as well as displaying honesty and vulnerability (Van Dierendonck, 2010) in both private and public settings. Authentic leaders continually represent their intentions, commitments, and moral code in a clear and accurate way. They remain true to themselves as an individual in all situations.

Current approaches to authenticity assume that the internalized values of individuals are difficult to understand and/or difficult to practice. Freeman and Auster (2011) proposed that it is critical that persons seek to understand themselves as individuals in order to be authentic, and researchers speculated that developing this understanding is a difficult process. In order to find one's authentic self, individuals must reflect upon their current and past self, think forward in regard to future ambitions and consider key interpersonal relationships (Freeman & Auster, 2011).



Studies have shown that there are connections between authentic leadership and employee job satisfaction. Wong and Laschinger (2012) suggested that workers feel empowered, are more satisfied with their roles, and perform at higher levels when they perceive their leaders as authentic. The authenticity of a leader, while difficult to define, has an impact on the organization in general and on followers as individuals.

### **Courage**

Greenleaf (1970) stated that daring to take risks and a willingness to try new approaches are critical aspects of the concept of courage. Further, he postulated that courage is one of the characteristics that separate servant leaders from others. Hernandez (2008) supported Greenleaf's working definition of courage through his suggestion that having courage includes challenging conventional models as a prerequisite to creativity and innovation.

Change in organizations is often difficult for individuals. Followers react to change in a variety of ways, some of which are not positive. Courageous leaders work through interpersonal and organizational conditions while remaining focused on the values of the organization and relying on their own values and convictions while making decisions (Russell & Stone, 2002).

While courage is mentioned in a variety of scholarly articles, researchers indicate that it has not been studied in great depth (Palanski, Cullen, Gentry, & Nichols, 2012). Palanski et al. did, however, discover research stating that courage drives performance as an example of expected behavior in organizations, and that courageous leaders model courage by remaining steadfast to the focus of the organization even in difficult situations. While courage can correctly be viewed as an effort to try new approaches, be innovative, and take risks, it also takes courage for a leader to maintain unwavering commitments when they are pushed to change in ways that do not preserve the mission and vision of the organization.

### **Empowerment**

Information sharing, individual coaching and the encouragement of independent decision-making among followers are indicators of empowerment (Spears, 2010). Empowerment is a focus on enabling people and inciting individual personal development (Conger, 2000). It includes aspects such as helping followers develop self-directed decision-making abilities, sharing information with others, coaching individuals toward performance (Konczak, Stelly, & Trusty, 2000), and giving followers power. The empowerment of followers fosters a proactive attitude while giving them a sense of individual power (Van Dierendonck, 2010).

Servant leaders who focus on the individual strengths and values of each follower, and work relentlessly to help them grow and realize their unique abilities, create conditions of empowerment for individuals and for the organization (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2010). Central to the servant leader's belief system is that each individual has an intrinsic

and unique value. The recognition and acknowledgment of the value of each individual help the followers realize their abilities, gain confidence, and continue to grow. The growth that occurs on an individual basis then helps the organization as a whole improve.

Empowerment differs from motivation in the level of need that is being satisfied. Motivation is utilized to satisfy levels of need that are lower on Maslow's hierarchy, such as salary, job security, and work conditions. Herzberg's Hygiene Theory would postulate that such needs cause motivation or demotivation. Empowerment comes into play when the work environment satisfies the employee's basic needs and said employees are seeking satisfaction regarding needs that are at higher levels. An increase in the satisfaction of esteem needs through empowerment allows an individual to pursue self-actualization.

Among building principals, those who experience empowerment have the autonomy to make decisions at the school level that are best for the unique school environment they lead as they seek to provide positive experiences for their students and staff while producing meaningful results. Even with new accountability measures, the implementation of requirements produce the best results when the principal is able to make decisions with a focus on the students, staff, parents, culture, climate, building resources, and individual systems that are in place in their school.

## **Forgiveness**

Forgiveness includes the ability to be empathetic to the feelings of others and the attempt to understand the perspective of individuals (McCollough, Hoyt, & Rachal, 2000). Creating an atmosphere of trust in which followers feel accepted rather than rejected, are free to take risks, are not discouraged from failure when trying new things, and are not discouraged from making mistakes are important parts of this aspect of servant leadership (Spears, 2010). The development of quality interpersonal relationships through understanding the behaviors of others is important for this characteristic.

Forgiveness includes the ability to let go of actual and perceived wrongdoings. It includes a mindset that does not carry grudges forward or harbor feelings of revenge or of an eagerness to get even with others (McCollough, Hoyt, & Rachal, 2000). Forgiveness of others is a useful trait when leaders are confronted with arguments and when they learn of the mistakes and offenses of others. Forgiveness allows the leader to remain focused on the right work rather than being distracted by feelings or behaviors that are counterproductive or distracting.

Our nation has experienced a variety of ethical disasters in recent years, and the news cycle continually highlights ethical failures. Holt and Marques (2011) believe that the teaching of empathy to professionals will help to reduce those situations in the future. Holt and Marques also indicated that while many people develop empathy over time through maturity, individuals can also grow in this area by purposefully practicing empathy.

## **Humility**

Servant leaders who display humility seek input and contributions from others (Spears, 2010). They keep their accomplishments and abilities in perspective and are modest about the successes that are attributed to them. Leaders who display humility put others first and provide them with the support they need to succeed while taking responsibility for their individual well-being and growth (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Hunter (1998) simplified this even further by defining humility as having the knowledge of one's self and one's limitations and being real and authentic with people.

Morris, Brotheridge, and Urbanski (2005) argued that admitting that one makes mistakes to others is a key component to humility, as is an acknowledgment that one is not perfect or "better" than others. The recognition and acknowledgment of the leader's limitations, as well as the intentional seeking of input and the contributions of others, are characteristics of a humble leader.

Researchers have not widely accepted humility as an essential component of leadership due to the difficulty in measuring its impact on individuals or on the organization. It is challenging to directly tie humility as a leadership characteristic to measurable results. Argandona (2014) argued that leaders make decisions based on a variety of virtues such as justice, strength, discipline, or reason, but few of those decisions can pinpoint actions of humility as determining factors.

## **Standing Back**

All people are on a continuum that spans the role from that of leader to that of the follower; individuals can ebb and flow on that continuum based on a variety of factors (Spears, 2010). Leaders who elect to move from the leadership portion of that continuum to the follower side increase opportunities for their followers to lead (Greenleaf, 1977). By making decisions to stand back and allow followers to shift toward the leadership portion of the continuum, the leader increases empowerment among followers.

Leadership in America has traditionally included one-way communication from leader to follower. Standing back allows followers to engage in the thinking and responsibility that comes with providing input or feedback and opens up opportunities for communication to become two-way in nature. A recent study of over 100,000 U.S. employees indicated that companies benefit from involving employees in decision-making opportunities (Stark, 2010). The study implied that workers who are involved in decision-making feel appreciated, take more responsibility for outcomes, focus on the future, reduce the blaming of others, make better decisions, show greater confidence in themselves, and display more enthusiasm than workers who are not involved in decision making.

Standing back includes the action of stepping back into the background when tasks are accomplished by individuals or teams. Doing so allows individuals or teams to feel pride in the work they accomplished as well as receive recognition. The concept of

standing back ties in closely to characteristics such as authenticity, empowerment, humility, and stewardship.

### **Stewardship**

A willingness of the leader to take responsibility for the organization, as well as to serve, rather than attempting to accumulate greater control or providing a focus on the self-interests of the leader is a way to think about stewardship (Van Dierendonck, 2010). Servant leaders who demonstrate stewardship continually act as role models, set examples, and motivate others to be loyal and to work collectively. Servant leaders espouse beliefs and actions that place shared interest ahead of personal interest and make the decisions that are best for the long-term benefit of the organization (Hernandez, 2008). Stewardship is related to loyalty, teamwork, social responsibility, and serving human needs.

In order to help ensure the success of the organization in the long-term, and to provide opportunities for followers to grow and have opportunities to lead in the future, leaders must recognize leadership potential in individuals and help those workers develop their capacity. Schneider (2014) summarized an important role of leaders as understanding that a critical leadership role is to nurture talent, which includes empowering those who take initiative and show leadership potential.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the relationship between superintendent servant leadership characteristics and principal job satisfaction?
2. Which specific servant leadership characteristics of superintendents are most highly related to principal job satisfaction?
  - a. Accountability
  - b. Authenticity
  - c. Courage
  - d. Empowerment
  - e. Humility
  - f. Forgiveness
  - g. Standing Back
  - h. Stewardship
3. Which specific servant leadership characteristics of superintendents are most highly related to principal intrinsic job satisfaction?
4. Which specific servant leadership characteristics of superintendents are most highly related to principal extrinsic job satisfaction?
5. To what extent do the demographic factors of principal gender, years as a principal, years working with the same superintendent, highest degree held, level of school, and size of school district relate to principal job satisfaction?

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which superintendents' servant leadership behaviors relate to the job satisfaction of principals. The study is an effort to add to previously established research and to provide data for use by school district administrators.

### Population and Sample

The research for this study was conducted in Iowa, located in the Midwest United States. The population consisted of principals in public schools. In order to reach those principals, all practicing principals in Iowa were contacted via e-mail addresses that are published annually by the Iowa Department of Education.

In an effort to gather participants, principals were sent an email and were given the opportunity to voluntarily take part in the study. If they elected to participate, they were asked to complete a survey related to the servant leadership characteristics demonstrated by their superintendent and questions regarding their individual job satisfaction levels. Principals were asked for demographic data such as gender, years working as a principal, years working with the same superintendent, highest degree held, school district size, and building level. In this study, the group of principals who received emails and completed the surveys are the sample.

### Instrumentation

This study used two distinct survey instruments to collect data. The Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) was centered on collecting superintendent servant leadership characteristic data. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, creators of this valid and reliable multi-dimensional servant leadership instrument, designated and expressly communicated their wishes that the SLS survey they created "may freely be used for scientific purposes" (2011, p. 256). The second instrument, the Minnesota Satisfaction Survey – Short Form (MSQ), was developed by the University of Minnesota and licensed under CC BY 2.0 and was focused on the collection of principal job satisfaction information (von Fischer, 2017). Researchers at the University of Minnesota tested for MSQ reliability and indicated the following coefficients: .80 for intrinsic satisfaction, .86 for extrinsic satisfaction, and .90 for general satisfaction (Weiss, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967, p. 23).

The Servant Leadership Survey is a 30-question, multi-dimensional instrument used to gather information related to the eight characteristics of servant leadership. The SLS focuses on exploring the leader-follower relationship by measuring the perspective of the follower (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). For each question, respondents choose one of six responses on a Likert continuum from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Each of the eight dimensions had multiple questions in which they corresponded: accountability (corresponded to three questions), authenticity (corresponded to four questions), courage (corresponded to two questions), empowerment (corresponded to seven questions), forgiveness (corresponded to three questions), humility (corresponded to five questions),

standing back (corresponded to three questions), and stewardship (corresponded to three questions) (von Fischer, 2017).

The Servant Leadership Survey was developed by Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2010) and has been tested for reliability. The following are the correlation coefficient levels for each of the eight characteristics: .81 for accountability (three items), .82 for authenticity (four items), .69 for courage (two items), .89 for empowerment (seven items), .72 for forgiveness (three items), .91 for humility (five items), .76 for standing back (three items), and .74 for stewardship (three items).

The Minnesota Satisfaction Survey – Short Form is a 20-question instrument used to gather information connected to job satisfaction. The MSQ was created to measure an employee's job satisfaction while providing information on specific aspects of a job that impacts an employee's satisfaction (Wies, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967). It contains questions related to intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction. For each question on the MSQ, respondents choose one of five responses on a Likert continuum from *very dissatisfied* to *very satisfied*.

The Minnesota Satisfaction Survey – Short Form was tested for reliability by researchers at the University of Minnesota. The correlation coefficients in the MSQ are as follows: .80 for intrinsic satisfaction, .86 for extrinsic satisfaction, and .90 for general satisfaction (Wiess, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967, p. 23).

## Data Collection

Public school principals in the state of Iowa were sent an e-mail participation invitation and were asked to voluntarily complete the two correspondingly attached survey instruments. The participating principals were asked to complete the surveys through Google Forms, which is a Google-based survey tool. Data were returned through Google Forms that were created and are owned by the author.

## Data Analysis

The researchers used SPSS, Version 25, of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences to analyze the data. Data from the two survey instruments were examined in a quantitative manner, using descriptive statistics, to present the results in a practical and convenient manner. Survey results with missing data were not utilized in the data analysis as only fully completed surveys were used in the data analysis. The data analyses were aligned to the research questions of the study, which are listed and explained below.

*Research Question 1.* What is the relationship between superintendent servant leadership characteristics and principal job satisfaction? To analyze the relationship between superintendent servant leadership characteristics and principal job satisfaction, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were used to measure the strength of the correlation between the variables (von Fischer, 2017).

*Research Question 2.* Which specific characteristics of servant leaders are most highly related to principal job satisfaction?

- a. Accountability
- b. Authenticity
- c. Courage
- d. Empowerment
- e. Humility
- f. Interpersonal Acceptance/Forgiveness
- g. Standing back
- h. Stewardship

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were used to examine the relationship between each of the eight servant leadership characteristics of superintendents and the job satisfaction of their principals (von Fischer, 2017).

*Research Question 3.* Which specific characteristics of servant leaders are most highly related to principal intrinsic job satisfaction? Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were used to examine the relationship between each of the eight superintendent servant leadership characteristics with the intrinsic job satisfaction of principals (von Fischer, 2017).

*Research Question 4.* Which specific characteristics of servant leaders are most highly related to principal extrinsic job satisfaction? Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were used to examine the relationship between each of the eight identified superintendent servant leadership characteristics with the extrinsic job satisfaction of principals (von Fischer, 2017).

*Research Question 5.* To what extent do the demographic factors of principal gender, years in education, years working with the same superintendent, highest degree held, school district size, and building level relate to principal job satisfaction? Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were used to examine the relationship between each of the following demographic factors: principal gender, years in education, years working with the same superintendent, highest degree held, school size, and building level with the job satisfaction of principals. For each correlation,  $p$ ,  $r$ , and  $r^2$  values were determined. Cohen's effect size guidelines were used to categorize correlations into the following strength categories: "weak" is for  $r < 0.3$ , "moderate" is for  $0.3 \geq r < 0.5$ , and "strong" for  $r \geq 0.5$  (von Fischer, 2017).

## **Response Rate**

All public school principals across the state of Iowa were sent an invitation to participate in the study. The participating principals were asked to complete a hyperlinked Google Form survey, which contained three distinct parts. The data were returned to the researcher and were stored within Google Forms. After two weeks, a follow-up email was sent to all Iowa public school principals, requesting completion of the surveys for those

who had not yet participated. Two weeks after the second email was sent, the survey was closed.

The Iowa Department of Education website publicly holds school administrator data and contact information. The directory contained contact information for 1164 school principals at 1316 attendance centers in the state. After eliminating the researcher, the total number of principals contacted in the study was 1163. Seventeen of the contacts were returned as undeliverable, so the final number of principals contacted in the survey was 1146. Of the 1146 possible survey responses, 312 were collected for a response rate of 27.2%. The survey results were electronically collected through Google Forms, a web-based survey application. Raw data were collected and stored by the researcher on Google Forms and was available in spreadsheet format through the Google Sheet that accompanies Google Forms.

### Demographic Data

The research for this study was conducted in Iowa, located in the Midwest United States. The population consisted of elementary and secondary principals in public schools. In order to reach those principals, all practicing principals in Iowa were contacted via e-mail addresses that are published annually by the Iowa Department of Education through the Iowa Public School District Directory database. Tables 1 – 7 describe the participants in this study.

Table 1

*Iowa Public School District Student and Administrative Data* (Iowa Department of Education, 2017-18 & 2018-19)

Descriptors	<i>N</i>
School Districts	330
Attendance (Buildings)	Centers 1316
PreK-12 Students	512,971
Full Time Principals	1164
Full Time Superintendents	273
Part Time Superintendents	7



Table 2  
*Distribution of Respondents by Gender*

Gender	<i>N</i>	%
Female	104	33.3
Male	207	66.3
Other	1	0.3
Total	312	100.0

Table 3  
*Distribution of Respondents by Years Employed as a Principal*

Years in Education	<i>N</i>	%
< 1 year	28	9.0
1 – 2 years	27	8.7
3 – 5 years	54	17.3
6 – 8 years	53	17.0
9 – 11 years	36	11.5
12 – 15 years	42	13.5
< 15 years	72	23.1
Total	312	100.0

Table 4  
*Distribution of Respondents by Number of Years Working with Current Superintendent*

Years with Current Superintendent	<i>N</i>	%
< 1 year	65	20.8
1 – 2 years	55	17.6
3 – 5 years	109	34.9
6 – 8 years	49	15.7
9 – 11 years	18	5.8
12 – 15 years	5	1.6
< 15 years	8	2.6
Total	312	100.0

Table 5  
*Distribution of Respondents by Highest Degree Held*

Highest Degree Held	<i>N</i>	%
Bachelor of Arts or Science	1	0.3
Master of Arts or Science	180	57.7
Multiple MA or MS	69	22.1
Educational Specialist	46	14.7
Education Doctorate or Ph.D.	16	5.1
Other	0	0.0
Total	312	100.0

Table 6  
*Distribution of Respondents by IHSAA Basketball Classification*

IAHSAA Classification	Football <i>N</i>	%
1A	86	27.6
2A	67	21.5
3A	76	24.4
4A	83	26.6
Total	312	100.0

Table 7  
*Distribution of Respondents by Level of School Building*

Building Level	<i>N</i>	%
Elementary	151	48.4
Middle School or Junior High	49	15.7
High School	94	30.1
Other	18	5.8
Total	312	100.0

## Findings

Research question one investigated the relationship between superintendent servant leadership characteristics and the job satisfaction of principals. The Minnesota Job Satisfaction Questionnaire–Short Form (MSQ) and the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) were used as variables in computing Pearson-product-moment correlation coefficients. Significance was tested at the level  $p < .01$ . The results of the analysis indicated that there is a strong relationship between superintendent servant leadership characteristics and principal job satisfaction. Table 1 summarizes the results.

### Relationship between superintendent servant leadership and job satisfaction of principals.

The results of the analysis indicated that there is a strong relationship between superintendent servant leadership characteristics and principal job satisfaction. Table 8 summarizes the results.

Table 8  
*Pearson Product-moment Correlations Between Superintendent Servant Leadership Characteristics (SLS) and Overall MSQ Scores*

Survey	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	$r^2$	<i>p</i>
SLS	312			
MSQ	312			
Total	312	.967	.935	.000

### Characteristics of servant leaders most highly related to principal job satisfaction.

The second research question investigated which of the superintendent servant leadership characteristics related most highly to principal job satisfaction. The results are shown in Table 9 and are organized in order of descending strength of the relationship.

Table 9  
*Pearson Product-moment Correlations Between Superintendent Servant Leadership Characteristics (SLS) and Total MSQ Scores Organized by Servant Leadership Characteristic.*

SL Characteristic	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	$r^2$	<i>p</i>	Strength
Empowerment	312	.729	.531	.000	strong
Standing Back	312	.593	.352	.000	strong
Stewardship	312	.572	.327	.000	strong
Humility	312	.566	.320	.000	strong

Authenticity	312	.544	.296	.000	strong
Accountability	312	.483	.233	.000	moderate
Courage	312	.366	.114	.000	moderate
Forgiveness	312	.360	.130	.000	moderate

**Characteristics of servant leaders most highly related to intrinsic job satisfaction.**

The third research question explored which of the superintendent servant leadership characteristics related most highly to principal intrinsic job satisfaction. The results are shown in Table 10 and are organized in order of descending strength of the relationship.

Table 10

*Pearson Product-moment Correlations Between Superintendent Servant Leadership Characteristics (SLS) and MSQ Intrinsic Scores Organized by Servant Leadership Characteristic.*

SL Characteristic	N	r	r <sup>2</sup>	p	Strength
Empowerment	312	.598	.358	.000	Strong
Standing Back	312	.452	.204	.000	Moderate
Stewardship	312	.425	.181	.000	Moderate
Authenticity	312	.407	.166	.000	Moderate
Humility	312	.403	.162	.000	Moderate
Accountability	312	.378	.143	.000	Moderate
Courage	312	.295	.087	.000	Weak
Forgiveness	312	.290	.084	.000	Weak

**Characteristics of servant leaders most highly related to extrinsic job satisfaction.**

The fourth research question explored which of the superintendent servant leadership characteristics related most highly to principal extrinsic job satisfaction. The results are shown in Table 11 and are organized in order of descending strength of the relationship.

Table 11

*Pearson Product-moment Correlations Between Superintendent Servant Leadership Characteristics SLS and MSQ Extrinsic Scores Organized by Servant Leadership Characteristic.*

SL Characteristic	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>p</i>	Strength
Empowerment	312	.757	.573	.000	Strong
Humility	312	.658	.433	.000	Strong
Standing Back	312	.656	.430	.000	Strong
Stewardship	312	.645	.416	.000	Strong
Authenticity	312	.609	.371	.000	Strong
Accountability	312	.522	.272	.000	Strong
Courage	312	.425	.181	.000	Moderate
Forgiveness	312	.379	.144	.000	Moderate

### **The relationship between demographic factors and principal job satisfaction.**

The fifth research question explored the extent to which the demographic factors of principal gender, years as a principal, number of years working with the current superintendent, highest degree held, school district size, and level of school building related to principal job satisfaction. The results of each demographic subcategory are explained in the sections below.

*Principal gender.* The comparison of the gender of principals and their MSQ responses served as variables for computing point biserial coefficient testing. Significance was tested at the level  $p < .01$ . The results did not show a significant correlation.

*Years as a principal.* The comparison of the number of years principals have been in their role and their MSQ responses served as variables for computing point biserial coefficient testing. Significance was tested at the level  $p < .01$ . The results did not show a significant correlation.

*Number of years with the current superintendent.* The comparison of the number of years principals worked with their current superintendent and their MSQ responses served as variables for computing point biserial coefficient testing. Significance was tested at the level  $p < .01$ . The results did not show a significant correlation.

*Highest degree held.* The comparison of the highest degree that the principals held and their MSQ responses served as variables for computing point biserial coefficient testing. Significance was tested at the level  $p < .01$ . The results did not show a significant correlation.

correlation.

*School district size.* The comparison of the size of the school district in which the principals worked and their MSQ responses served as variables for computing point biserial coefficient testing. Significance was tested at the level  $p < .01$ . The results did not show a significant correlation.

*Level of the school building.* The comparison of the level of the school building in the principals worked their MSQ responses served as variables for computing point biserial coefficient testing. Significance was tested at the level  $p < .01$ . The results did not show a significant correlation at the level  $p < .01$ . It did, however, show a weak correlation of significance at the  $p < .05$  level, which is a commonly used level of significance related to the 95% confidence level. Table 12 summarizes the results.

Table 12

*Pearson Product-moment Correlations Between Total MSQ Score and Building Level*

Building Level	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>p</i>
Elementary	151			
Middle School or Junior High	49			
High School	94			
Other	18			
Total	312	-.119	.014	.035

### Summary Findings

The following conclusions emerged from the study findings:

1. Principals who perceive that their superintendent exhibits servant leadership behaviors are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs.
2. Principals who perceive that their superintendent exhibits servant leadership behaviors are more likely to be satisfied with the intrinsic factors of their jobs.
3. Principals who perceive that their superintendent exhibits servant leadership behaviors are more likely to be satisfied with the extrinsic factors of their jobs.
4. Job-related factors that are extrinsic in nature are more highly related to superintendent servant leadership behaviors than job-related factors that are intrinsic in nature.
5. Of the eight superintendent servant leadership characteristics, “empowerment” and “standing back” are the most highly related to overall principal job satisfaction.
6. Of the eight superintendent servant leadership characteristics, “empowerment” and “standing back” are the most highly related to the intrinsic portion of principal job satisfaction.
7. Of the eight superintendent servant leadership characteristics, “empowerment” and

“humility” are the most highly related to the extrinsic portion of principal job satisfaction.

8. The demographic factors of gender, years working as a principal, years working with the same superintendent, highest degree held, and size of the district do not influence principal job satisfaction. The level of the school building in which a principal works has a weak correlation to principal job satisfaction.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are comparable to the results of studies by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2010) and von Fischer and De Jong (2017) in that it shows that servant leadership is highly correlated with job satisfaction. More specifically, these studies show that servant leadership of superintendents is highly correlated to principal job satisfaction and that servant leadership of principals is highly correlated to teacher job satisfaction. The results of this study indicate that servant leadership is a style that superintendents can utilize in an effort to provide conditions in which principals who work under them feel satisfied with their jobs. This is significant because it provides a tangible set of characteristics that superintendents can develop in order to improve the job satisfaction of principals. Also, school boards should seek superintendents who demonstrate servant leadership characteristics when they utilize the recruiting and selection process for hiring new superintendents.

There are several characteristics of servant leadership that show stronger relationships to job satisfaction than others. Of the five servant leadership characteristics that show strong relationships to job satisfaction, “empowerment” is the strongest. Over 53% of the variation in principal job satisfaction is described by variations in the perception that the superintendent demonstrates empowerment as a characteristic. This suggests that superintendents might help principals become more satisfied with their jobs if they focus their own efforts on the development of the characteristic of “empowerment”.

The servant leadership characteristics of “standing back”, “stewardship”, “humility”, and “authenticity” also showed strong relationships to principal job satisfaction, though to a smaller degree than that of “empowerment”. The servant leadership characteristics of “accountability”, “courage”, and “forgiveness” showed moderate relationships to principal job satisfaction. It appears to be most efficient for a superintendent to focus on the behavior of “empowerment”. However, a focus on other servant leadership characteristics has the potential to increase principal job satisfaction.

Each of the eight superintendent servant leadership characteristics is more highly related to principal extrinsic job satisfaction than they are to principal intrinsic job satisfaction. Based on the extrinsic survey items on the MSQ, the following superintendent behaviors will have an impact on principal job satisfaction: the way the superintendent handles his or her employees, superintendent competence in decision-making, and the way school district policies are put into practice. Because of this, the evaluation processes for

superintendents should include servant leadership factors as components for continual growth. Also, superintendents should gather feedback from principals regarding the perception of their servant leadership characteristics to help inform their practices and awareness. Further extrinsic factors that the superintendent should consider include principal pay and principal workload, opportunities for principal advancement, working conditions, the way colleagues get along with one another, and the praise principals get for doing a good job. Superintendents should be aware of the servant leadership factors that are related to principal job satisfaction, especially those that have an impact on extrinsic motivation.

Superintendent servant leadership behaviors have a less direct relationship to principal intrinsic job satisfaction than they do to extrinsic job satisfaction. “Empowerment”, however, continues to show a strong relationship to principal intrinsic job satisfaction. Furthermore, “standing back”, “stewardship”, “authenticity”, and “humility” are moderately related to principal intrinsic job satisfaction. Courage and forgiveness are characteristics that do not indicate a strong relationship to job satisfaction. Perhaps using the term “empathy” would be a better term for use as a variable. The study does not provide an explanation for why principal extrinsic satisfaction is more highly related to superintendent servant leadership behaviors than is principal intrinsic job satisfaction.

There are additional organizations that would benefit from the results of this study. Institutions of higher learning should be aware of the impact of superintendent servant leadership behaviors on principal job satisfaction and should utilize this information to help would-be superintendents assess their own leadership characteristics and grow in them. Professional organizations that provide support and provide professional development for principals and superintendents should be aware of the impact of superintendent servant leadership behaviors on principal job satisfaction and should utilize this information to help acting and would-be superintendents assess their own leadership characteristics and grow in them.

This study did not find significant relationships between principal job satisfaction and the demographic variables that were investigated. Because of this, school boards and superintendents should be aware that the demographic factors listed in this study do not indicate a relationship to principal job satisfaction when they are making hiring considerations. Principal gender, years as a principal, number of years working with the current superintendent, highest degree held, school district size, and level of school building did not have a relationship or had a weak relationship to principal job satisfaction. Of interest to the researcher, the number of years working with the superintendent did not show a relationship with principal job satisfaction. It is notable that a superintendent who is new to a district or to a principal has the potential to impact principal job satisfaction through their servant leadership behaviors to the same extent as a superintendent who has worked in an organization or with a principal for a longer amount of time.



The literature on servant leadership is connected to portions of Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and the Job Characteristic Model. Servant leadership stresses the value of helping followers grow, which ties into the psychological portion of Maslow's hierarchy. The emphasis of the characteristics of empowerment, standing back, and stewardship in servant leadership theory associate with Herzberg's motivating factors of recognition, input into decision making, responsibility, and a sense of importance within an organization (Herzberg, 1987, p. 8). These same specific servant leadership characteristics relate to the factors of autonomy and feedback, which are key components of the Job Characteristic Model.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The following are recommendations for future research.

1. This study was conducted among public school principals in a rural Midwestern state. Research should be conducted in another region or state to give insight into the validity of this study.
2. Future research should utilize a qualitative approach to investigating the relationship of superintendent servant leadership characteristics to principal job satisfaction to provide insight into the validity of this study through a different approach.
3. Future research should seek to determine the extent to which the servant leadership behaviors of other district office-level leaders or School Board members are related to principal job satisfaction.
4. Future research should study the impact of principal job satisfaction on principal efficacy.
5. Future research should study the impact of superintendent servant leadership characteristics on the job satisfaction of employees who are not principals in a school district.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

Since the study was a survey of public school principals in the state of Iowa, the results of the study may not be generalizable to other levels of education or to locations outside of Iowa. Also, participation rates may have been impacted by the time and effort it took to complete the surveys. Another limitation is that survey research is collected at one single point in time, which does not lend itself well to following trends over long periods of time. Survey research may also be an oversimplification of social reality as correlations between principal job satisfaction and superintendent servant leadership is a complex endeavor.

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