



Servant Leadership, Optimal Experience, and Meaningful Life

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Abstract

Optimal experience – also known as Flow – was coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 1975 in his research study of joy, creativity, and the total involvement with life. Optimal experience is about focused attention and control of consciousness. Likewise, servant leadership is a conscious choice which aspires one to lead (Greenleaf, 1970). After a close examination of the philosophy of servant leadership by Greenleaf (1970), the attributes and behaviors of servant leaders by Laub (1999), Russell and Stone (2002), Patterson (2003), Keith (2008), Spears (2010), and Sipe and Frick (2015), it is argued that the work of a servant leader meets most if not all of the prescriptions of the flow model as listed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). In the state of flow, a servant leader's personal identity (i.e. the concept of self) and social identity (i.e. the concept of self based on perceived membership in a relevant social group) is also consolidated. A practical implication of this conceptual discussion is that a servant leader, who serves the betterment of others and the greater good of the society, should create an environment for others to experience flow. When the cumulated works of a servant leader fit together into a unified optimal experience, he/she finds fulfillment and lives a meaningful life. This is an example of the power and promise of servant leadership as posed by Greenleaf (1970).

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Optimal Experience, Meaningful Life

When a person's challenge matches with his/her skill set, he/she experiences pleasure and enjoyment, as well as feels happy, strong, creative, and satisfied (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi explains that optimal experience, also known as flow, leads to new discovery and growth, and it is obtainable by everyone. Therefore, finding joy and meaning in life has little to do with one's circumstance, social status, intelligence, or career choice, but an inner control of consciousness. Similarly, servant leadership, coined by Greenleaf (1970), is also a personal choice of seeking the interests of others over self-interest, and its invitation is open to everyone who has the desire to serve others.

Although there are studies on optimal experience and servant leadership separately, there is neither conceptual discussion nor practical implication of its possible connection. Do servant leaders experience flow with their work? Do servant leaders yield the benefits of flow from their work? Should the creation of a flow environment be a way to serve others?

The literature review begins with the concept of optimal experience by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) and lists the criteria of the flow model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It states the philosophy of servant leadership by Greenleaf (1970), as well as attributes and practices of servant leaders by Laub (1999), Russell and Stone (2002), Patterson (2003), Keith (2008), Spears (2010), and Sipe and Frick (2015). Its main purpose is to discuss whether the works of a servant leader meet any of the prescriptions of the flow model.

Further discussion suggests that a servant leader's personal identity (i.e. the concept of self) and social identity (i.e. the concept of self-based on perceived membership in a relevant social group) are consolidated in the state of flow. When the cumulated works of a servant leader can be fitted into a unified optimal experience, he/she finds meanings and lives a purposeful life.

"Servant leadership is a philosophy and set of practices that enriches the lives of individuals, builds better organizations and ultimately creates a more just and caring world" (Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2016). Given the benefits of optimal experience, a practical implication is that a servant leader creates an environment for others to experience flow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE

Optimal experience – also known as Flow – was conceptualized by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 1975 in his research study of joy, creativity, and the total involvement with life. In his study of optimal experience in work and leisure, using the Experience Sampling Method, each of 78 participants carried an electronic pager for one week (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre, 1989). Whenever the pagers beeped in response to signals sent at eight random times during the day for that week, the participants recorded what they were doing and how they felt at the moment. Furthermore, they were asked to indicate, on ten-point scales, their perceived levels of challenge and required skill (i.e. competency for the task). The participant was considered to be in flow when he or she recorded both the level of

challenges and the level of skills to be in balance and above the mean level of the week. There were a total of 4,791 responses collected with an average of 44 per participant per week (85% of all signals sent). The findings showed that people in flow felt strong, active, creative, concentrated, and motivated.

Commonsense assumptions notwithstanding, people reported flow situations three times more often at work than in leisure. The overall percentages of responses in flow at work and in leisure were 54% and 17% respectively. Examples of leisure activities as reported were reading, watching TV, having friends over, or going to a restaurant. Specifically, the occupational groups differed in the amount of time spent in flow at work (managers, 64%; clerical workers, 51%; blue-collar workers, 47%). Furthermore, affect, potency, concentration, creativity, satisfaction, and motivation were all higher in flow than in non-flow.

When a person perceives that both challenges and skills are high, the quality of experience is likely to be positive, and vice versa. Therefore, people may psychologically want to work less and spend more time in leisure. However, people feel happy, strong, creative, and satisfied when they apply their minds and hands to useful, productive, skillful, and challenging work. In addition, flow experience as a result of applying and practicing skills lead to growth and new discovery.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p.49) summarized from his studies that people, who experience flow, mention one and often all of the following:

1. They are working on tasks that have a chance of completing.
2. They are able to concentrate on what they are doing.
3. The task undertaken has clear goals.
4. Immediate feedback is available with the task.
5. The depth of focus toward the task removes worries and frustrations of everyday life.
6. They are able to exercise a sense of control over their actions.
7. Concern for the self disappears during the flow experience and emerges stronger afterward.
8. The sense of the duration of time is altered; hours pass by in minutes, and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argued that “optimal experience depends on a *subjective evaluation* of what the possibilities for action are, and of one’s own capabilities” (p.154, italic added). The same job can be interpreted as either brutal and boring, or enjoyable and exciting. Optimal experience is not mystical and it is within the reach of everyone in their daily living. It is “simply by the gradual focusing of attention on the opportunities for action in one’s environment, which results in a perfection of skills” (p.151).

Csikszentmihalyi suggested that “in theory, any job could be changed so as to make it more enjoyable by following the prescriptions of the flow model” (p.154). Furthermore, beyond momentary pleasure and enjoyment, people long for meaning, purpose, and significance in their lives. This requires people to find goals that are worthy of investing all their energies to pursue. When one’s feelings, thoughts and actions are congruent with one another, he/she has achieved inner harmony (p.127). Therefore, identifying a purpose, which justifies one to invest

relentless resolution to accomplish, gives meaning to life and transforms it into a unified flow experience.

Optimal experience has been researched worldwide with corroborating evidence in the areas such as sports (Jackson and Kimiecik, 2008; Harmison, 2006; Russell, 2001), music (Fritz and Avsec, 2007; MacDonal et al., 2006; Wrigley and Emmerson, 2013), performing arts (Hefferon and Ollis, 2006; Martin and Cutler, 2002), work (Demerouti, 2006; Fave and Massimini, 2003), school (Bassi and Fave, 2012), web activities (Chen et al., 1999), and adolescents' daily lives (Clarke and Haworth, 1999; Tavares et al., 2020). Recent empirical studies have also found that flow is positively associated with one's development of personal identity (Mao, Roberts and Bonaiuto, 2016), social identity (Mao, Roberts, Pagliaro, et al, 2016), and place identity (Bonaiuto et al., 2016).

The coming section will discuss the research and development of servant leadership in terms of its belief, root, role, motive, mission, vision, behaviours, and character traits over the years. The literature review of optimal experience and servant leadership form the base to explore if servant leaders experience flow with their work.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Servant leadership is a personal choice for life, a way of developing others for their betterment, and a legacy of fulfilled lives by serving others. This philosophy can be traced back to ancient Chinese writer, Lao-tzu, who said that "when the best leader's work is done, the people say, 'we did it ourselves!'" (as cited in Blanchard et al., 2013, p.97) and early Christianity's founder, Jesus Christ, who said in Matthew 11:23 that "the greatest among you shall be your servant" (as cited in Brewer, 2010).

In his seminal essay, *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf (1970) outlined the being, motive, mission, and vision of a servant leader. A servant leader is first and foremost a servant. His/her motive is to serve others for their betterment. His/her mission and purposes for life are to bring liberation for others in terms of growth, health, freedom, wisdom, and autonomy. His/her vision is to contribute to the greater good of society.

Greenleaf found that *Journey to the East*, a novel written by Hermann Hesse (1956), gives a good analogy of servant leadership. The story is about a band of people going on a journey. Each of the men has his own aspiration and dream. Leo is their servant who does simple chores and brings encouragement to them with his songs and positive spirit. Unfortunately, Leo goes missing in a turn of the plot. As a result, the group falls apart and the journey dissolves itself. The narrator, one of the men in the band, continues to wander through life for years and is eventually taken to the Order that had sponsored the journey. To his surprise, the narrator finds Leo whose real identity is the head of the Order! Hesse concludes that Leo, being a servant, is indeed the leader. A servant leader serves by leading and leads by serving.

Blanchard (2004) pointed out that the ultimate responsibility of a servant leader is to invest his/her life into the lives of those who follow. Power should be

shared with others because leaders who seek power do not truly develop others (Ortberg, 2004).

Over the years, many researchers have defined and refined the behaviours and characteristics of servant leaders. Six examples are shown in Table 1. Lamb (1999) advocated for six practices of servant leaders and servant organization. Russell and Stone (2002) identified 9 functional attributes and 11 accompanying attributes of servant leadership. Patterson (2003) articulated seven virtuous constructs of servant leadership. Keith (2008) identified seven key practices of servant leaders. Spears (2010) summarized 10 characteristics of servant leaders. Sipe and Frick (2015) developed seven pillars with 21 traits of servant leadership.

The lists are not meant to be exhaustive but provide an informative outlook of servant leaders' attributes and behaviours. Not only can they be used for self-reflection of leadership strengths and areas for development, but also for the discussion of the optional experience of servant leaders.

Table 1: Overview of Servant Leadership Research and Development

Laub (1999)	Russell and Stone (2002)	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Value people 2. Develop people 3. Provide leadership 4. Share leadership 5. Build community 6. Display authenticity 	Functional Attributes* <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Vision 2. Honesty 3. Integrity 4. Trust 5. Service 6. Modeling 7. Pioneering 8. Appreciation of Others 9. Empowerment 	Accompanying Attributes^ <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communication 2. Credibility 3. Competency 4. Stewardship 5. Visibility 6. Influence 7. Persuasion 8. Listening 9. Encouragement 10. Teaching 11. Delegation
Patterson (2003)	Keith (2008)	Spears (2010)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Agapao love 2. Humility 3. Altruism 4. Vision 5. Trust 6. Empowerment 7. Service 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-awareness 2. Listening 3. Changing the pyramid 4. Developing your colleagues 5. Coaching not controlling 6. Unleashing the energy and intelligence of others 7. Foresight 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listening 2. Empathy 3. Healing 4. Awareness 5. Persuasion 6. Conceptualization 7. Foresight 8. Stewardship 9. Commitment to the Growth of People 10. Building Community
Sipe and Frick (2015)		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Person of character <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintains integrity ● Demonstrate humility ● serves a higher purpose 2. Puts people first <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● displays a servant's heart ● is mentor-minded ● shows care & concern 3. Skilled communicator <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● demonstrates empathy ● invites feedback ● communicates persuasively 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Compassionate collaborator <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● expresses appreciation ● builds teams & communities ● negotiates conflict 5. Has Foresight <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● visionary ● displays creativity ● takes courageous & decisive action 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. System thinker <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● comfortable with complexity ● demonstrates adaptability ● considers the "greater good" 7. Leads with moral authority <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● accepts & delegate responsibility ● shares power & control ● creates a culture of accountability

* Functional attributes are the operative qualities, characteristics, and distinctive features belonging to leaders and observed through specific leader behaviors in the workplace.

^ Accompanying attributes are complementary and, in some cases, prerequisites to effective servant leadership.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE

Both servant leadership and optimal experience are within reach of everyone because they are subjected to one's conscious choices and then voluntary efforts. "Servant leadership is a question of inner motivation, of a deeply felt mission, and *everyone can become a servant-leader*" (Trompenaars and Voerman, 2009, p.14, italic added). Similarly, the optimal experience is something that we make happen when we stretch our body and mind to do something difficult and worthwhile (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.3).

The vision and mission of a servant leader is to heal brokenness and restore wholeness, and to build relationships between the servant leader and his/her followers and their community. It is likely that, while working on these goals, servant leaders feel strong, active, creative, concentrated, and motivated as described by people in the state of flow.

As a servant leader remains steadfast throughout his/her service to others, it is reasonable to believe that he/she perceives that his/her level of challenge matches his/her required skills/competency. This is an indicator of people in the state of optimal experience.

Furthermore, a servant leader looks for ways to help others. Gradually, he/she develops skills and becomes more effective. Growth and new discovery are also characteristics of optimal experience.

Given the above arguments, the overlaps between the attributes and behaviors of a servant leader as stated in Table 1 and the eight prescriptions of the flow model as outlined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) are discussed below:

1. They are working on tasks that have a chance of completing. As stated by Laub (1999), a servant leader values and develops others. He/she provides and shares leadership in order to build their community. Throughout the whole process, the servant leader displays authenticity so that people are willing to trust their leader and even forgive their leader if he/she makes mistakes. Sipe and Frick (2015) considered a servant leader as a compassionate collaborator. Hence, a servant leader is working on tasks that have a chance of completion because he/she is not a lone ranger but works collaboratively with others in a supportive community.

2. They are able to concentrate on what they are doing. Russell and Stone (2002) and Spears (2010) identified stewardship as an attribute of a servant leader. A steward is entrusted with valuable assets because of his/her dedication and commitment. The other characteristics of a servant leader as highlighted by Russell and Stone (2002) are honesty, integrity, trust, service, credibility, and competency. A steward with these qualities is mindful of his/her time, resource, and responsibility, and he/she is able to concentrate on his/her task on hand.

3. The task undertaken has clear goals. Patterson (2003) argued that servant leadership consists of seven virtuous constructs that work in a processional pattern. Agapao love is the cornerstone of the servant leadership/follower relationship. It inspires the leader to do the right thing at the right time for the right reasons. Humility and altruism sharpen the vision of a servant leader. The focus of a servant leader is on the welfare of others. Followers trust their leader and he/she in turn empowers them to make their dreams into reality. The ultimate goal

is to serve the interests of others rather than self-interest. The litmus paper of servant leadership as stated by Greenleaf (1970) is for others to grow and become healthier, freer, wiser and more autonomous. Therefore, a servant leader is clear of his/her mission and goals.

4. Immediate feedback is available with the task. Listening is an essential trait of a servant leader (Keith, 2008; Russell and Stone, 2002; Spears, 2010). Sipe and Frick (2015) elaborated that a servant leader is a skilled communicator who demonstrates empathy, invites feedback and communicates persuasively. Hence, it is reasonable to believe that a servant leader actively seeks feedback from his/her followers so that he/she can serve them better.

5. The depth of focus toward the task removes worries and frustrations of everyday life. There is no research finding to support that the work of a servant leader removes worries and frustrations of everyday life. On the contrary, Greenleaf (1970) argued that servant leaders are not seekers after solace. They are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. However, through solitude in the art of withdrawal, servant leaders are able to find serenity and gain insight.

6. They are able to exercise a sense of control over their actions. Proper planning is vital for the execution of prudent actions. Servant leaders are characterized with vision (Patterson, 2003; Russell and Stone, 2002), foresight (Keith, 2008; Sipe and Frick, 2015; Spears, 2010), awareness (Spears 2010), self-awareness (Keith, 2008), conceptualization (Spears, 2010), and stewardship (Russell and Stone, 2002; Spears, 2010). Sipe and Frick (2015) considered them to be system thinkers who are comfortable with complexity. They learn from lessons of the past, understand the opportunities of the present, and anticipate the consequences of decisions for the future (Spears, 2010). These qualities of servant leaders are essential for good planning which results in a sense of control over one's actions.

7. Concern for the self disappears during the flow experience and emerges stronger afterward. Blanchard (2007, p.263) said that "servant leaders don't think less of themselves, they just think about themselves less". Keith (2008) argued that a servant leader works toward changing the traditional organization pyramid and developing his/her colleagues. He/She is eager to unleash the energy and intelligence of others. A servant leader puts people first (Sipe and Frick, 2015). This implies that a servant leader's concern for him/herself is likely minimized when he/she focuses on the needs of others. In the long run, a servant leader witnesses the growth and success of his/her followers, and his/her identity - an agent of change - emerges stronger.

8. The sense of the duration of time is altered; hours pass by in minutes, and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours. Although there is no research on servant leaders and their sense of time, it is probable that when a servant leader is deeply focused on his/her work, his/her sense of time is altered.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argued that people, who experience flow, mention one and often eight of the above-bolded statements. This discussion shows that servant leaders are likely to experience at least six out of eight prescriptions of the flow model. Therefore, servant leaders experience flow while serving others.

DISCUSSION

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND MEANINGFUL LIFE

Greenleaf (1970) stated that servant leadership is not a management technique, but a calling and a way of life. In a close examination of the philosophy and framework of servant leadership, the life of a servant leader fits well with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) definition of a meaningful life.

If a person sets out to achieve a difficult enough goal, from which all other goals logically follow, and if he or she invests all energy in developing skills to reach that goal, then actions and feelings will be in harmony, and the separate parts of life will fit together - and each activity will "make sense" in the present, as well as in view of the past and of the future. In such a way, it is possible to give meaning to one's entire life. (p.124)

Hence, theoretical implications are that servant leadership not only leads to the betterment of others and society but also results in optimal experience and meaningful life. While a servant leader lives with purpose and creates a legacy of influence by serving others, his/her personal identity (e.g. a servant leader, mentor or coach) and social identity (e.g. a community builder) are consolidated as a result of their services to others. The cumulated work of a servant leader can be fitted into a unified flow experience. That is an example of the promise and power of servant leadership as stated by Greenleaf (1970).

The ideal outcomes of servant leadership — healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous — are compatible and complementary with those of optimal experience — happy, strong, creative, and satisfied. Growth and new discovery are also common themes of servant leadership and optimal experience. Therefore, a practical implication is that a servant leader should create an environment for others to experience flow.

Lastly, there is no research finding to support that the depth of focus toward the task of a servant leader removes worries and frustrations of everyday life. Moreover, study of servant leaders and their sense of time is lacking. Further research on these two areas can strengthen the conceptual discussion of servant leadership and optimal experience. Empirical research on optimal experiences of servant leaders is also a worthwhile pursuit to advance this argument.

CONCLUSION

During flow, people feel happy, strong, creative, and satisfied. It is argued that servant leaders experience flow when serving and leading others. In the state of flow, a servant leader's personal identity and his/her social identity are consolidated. Optimal experience leads to growth and new discovery and a servant leader also wants the same for his/her followers. A servant leader is encouraged to create an environment for others to experience flow.

A servant leader has a clear identity and direction for life. When a servant leader channels all his/her energies to the greater good of the society by helping others to achieve their potential and growth, he/she has inner harmony and builds a unified flow experience throughout his/her life, which Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described as a meaningful life and Greenleaf (1977) a legacy of greatness.

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