



# Does Servant Leadership Need a Universal Definition?

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It has been a busy period since the last edition of *Servant Leadership: Theory & Practice* was published and I must say I am encouraged with the number and quality of articles that have been submitted to the journal. A primary desire as editor has been to shorten the amount of time it takes for an article to go from submission to initial decision. While we have not yet consistently met our 3-month target timeframe, we are seeing improvements on this goal and this is all due to a dedicated group of reviewers who willingly give their time to serve the journal and our mission of becoming the first choice journal for authors and researchers of servant leadership and related fields.

I'd like to discuss a few plans to move the field and the journal forward. There is an obvious need to expand our database of willing reviewers in order to accomplish our goal of a 3-month review process. A few individuals have selflessly reviewed multiple articles in a calendar year but moving forward, I hope that others will choose to serve the journal by agreeing to review articles as we attempt to streamline our operations. There is also a need to promote the "related fields" in our vision statement. Servant leadership bears much similarity to transformational, authentic, empowering, and ethical leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011) so research comparing and contrasting these fields with servant leadership are of high interest to the journal.

Servant leadership's definition has long been the focus of many of its critics (see Parris & Peachey, 2013). Is it time for proponents of servant leadership to address the lack of a universal definition? Stogdill (1974, p. 289) once stated that "there are almost as many definitions of *leadership* as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept." Today, *leadership* still lacks a universal definition; yet, that has not deterred researchers from advancing the construct as a field of knowledge. Researchers have progressed with a general and accepted understanding of leadership as an influence process exerted by one to guide others in a group or organization (Yukl, 2006). Should servant leadership researchers progress with a general understanding that servant

leadership is an influence process founded upon service to others? Or, should they address the definition problem, which has prompted a number of scholars to call for construct clarity (Brown & Bryant, 2016; Parris & Peachey, 2013). If there is an insistence to universally define servant leadership, who is to define it? There are a number of working definitions (e.g. Laub, 2004; Page & Wong, 2002; Patterson, 2003) worthy of consideration. However, the question remains: does servant leadership really need to be universally defined? Before concluding that it must, consider that even the more popular theory of transformational leadership has been broadly defined (see Bass & Bass, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 1993; Yukl, 2006) though most definitions build off of Burns' (1978) characterization of transformational leadership as a process that inspires followers by appealing to higher ideals and morals. Whether researchers ever agree upon a universal definition of servant leadership or not, it is clear that great theoretical and practical advancements are being made. The current working definitions noted above all build upon Greenleaf's (1977) depiction of service to others. Perhaps in time the field will settle upon an official definition of servant leadership; but until that day, the present conceptualizations are helping move our theoretical and practical understanding of servant leadership forward.

Now, onto the current articles. The present issue is comprised of: Fleming, De Jong, von Fischer, Avoseh, and Santo's empirical examination of superintendent servant leadership behaviors and principal job satisfaction among public schools in Iowa; Ferris' introduction of a theoretical model of assertive servant leadership; Freeborough's correlational analysis of transformational leadership on nonprofit leader commitment, and Gain and Bryant's surprising case for the lack of compatibility of servant leadership with U.S. Army leadership doctrine.

Fleming and colleagues address the issue of high turnover related to job dissatisfaction among school principals in Iowa by empirically testing the extent to which superintendent servant leadership behaviors correlate with principal job satisfaction. The results of their study indicate that servant leadership is a style that superintendents can utilize in an effort to provide conditions that increase principal job satisfaction.

Ferris introduces an "assertive servant leadership model" that is based on both Greenleaf's (1977) and Patterson's (2003) approaches to servant leadership. Ferris contends that the concept of assertiveness has not been fully considered in servant leadership and makes the case that it is a meaningful, but missing, component of the theory. Ferris' model contends that servant leaders should align with the concept of assertiveness as they naturally build strong leader-follower relationships. As such, followers are more likely to respond favorably to a servant leader.

Freeborough explores the effect of transformational leadership on nonprofit leader commitment. His study extends previous research on transformational leadership and employee engagement to determine whether nonprofit employees are more committed in organizations in which transformational leadership is the dominant form of leadership. Based on his findings, Freeborough highlights implications and suggestions

for future research on how transformational and servant leadership should be extended into the nonprofit sector.

Finally, servant leadership is often regarded as a natural fit with military organizations (see Berry, 2015; Jordan, 2015; and Duffy, 2016). However, Gain and Bryant challenge this assumption by building a case that servant leadership is fundamentally incompatible with U.S. Army leadership and is not a viable option for official U.S. Army doctrine. Nevertheless, the authors do consider some of the tenets of servant leadership as being adoptable and adaptable by the U.S. Army.

I hope you enjoy the articles in this edition of SLTP. As always, how can I help?

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