



The Effects of Team Potency, Leader Communication Frequency, and Goal Clarity on the Relationship between Servant Leadership and Team Performance: A Focus on the Fundraising Profession and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that the practice of servant leadership improves team performance in organizations; however, the specific reasons for this positive influence are still being investigated. This paper puts forth a conceptual model that considers the mediating effect of team potency and the moderating influences of leader communication frequency and clarity of team goals on the servant leadership-team performance relationship. Based on a review of the literature, four propositions regarding the positive influence of these variables on the servant leadership-team performance relationship are put forth. The importance of the servant leader-team performance relationship and the effects of the moderating and mediating variables are discussed in the context of the fundraising profession. The positive effect of servant leadership on team performance during the COVID-19 pandemic is briefly examined. Implications for researchers and managers, limitations, and suggestions for future research are also presented.

Keywords: Team Potency, Leader Communication, Goal Clarity, Servant Leadership, Team Performance, COVID-19

Over the years, different leadership theories have been studied to better understand their outcomes on various factors, including employee job satisfaction, employee growth, trust levels, job performance, and profits, among others (e.g. Jaramillo et al., 2015; Kiker et al., 2019; Locke & Latham, 1990; Peterson et al., 2012; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Greenleaf (1970) conceptualized the philosophy of servant leadership, whereby the leader is servant first then conscious choice leads to the aspiration for leadership. Research on servant leadership and its outcomes has increased in recent decades (Panaccio et al., 2015). One outcome of servant leader behavior that has been studied is the effect on follower (e.g. employee and volunteer) job performance (e.g. Abu Bakar & McCann, 2018; Liden et al., 2014; Van Dierendonck, 2011; Wang et al., 2018). The influence of servant leadership on organizational and team performance is of great interest to employers, CEOs, trustees, and others in leadership positions. As noted by Hoch et al. (2016), servant leadership involves a focus on the follower and their needs; by first facilitating the development and well-being of followers, long-term organizational goals will be achieved. Peterson et al. (2012) proposed that followers who are empowered, encouraged to reach their highest potential, and given clarity of focus, strive to perform at the highest level. The people-centered nature of servant leadership likely results in employees who are more satisfied, committed, and better performing (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

Studies on servant leader outcomes have shown that team potency mediates the relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness, including team performance (Hu & Liden, 2011). Team potency is defined as members' shared confidence in a team's general capabilities across tasks and contexts (Gully et al., 2002). Hu & Liden (2011) suggested two reasons why servant leadership increases team potency and team effectiveness. First, servant leaders put the needs of their followers first, gain team member trust, and build long-term relationships by showing genuine concern for all team members (Liden et al., 2008). Second, the complexity of modern work environments leads to many potential changes and unexpected problems, requiring team members to collaborate to solve them.

In addition to mediating effects such as team potency, many factors may strengthen the servant leadership-team performance relationship, including employee experience (Jaramillo et al., 2009), trust in supervisor (Jaramillo et al., 2015), ethical climate (Schwepker & Schultz, 2015), and organizational embodiment (Wang et al., 2018). However, two variables moderating this relationship that have not been studied are leader communication frequency and clarity of goals. These factors are more critical than ever with the displacement of teams that has occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic; studying their effects will be useful as organizations continue to provide telework opportunities for employees. Leader communication, which can be dyadic or at the team level, has been conceptualized as both information exchange and meaning sharing (Jian & Dalisay, 2018). Supervisors communicate job-relevant information and provide feedback regarding performance (Miles et al., 1996); in turn, this communication can affect job performance (Alexander et al., 1989). Studies of leader-member exchange (LMX), a dyadic exchange relationship between an employee and their leader, have shown that increased communication frequency improves job

performance (Gajendran & Joshi, 2012; Kacmar et al., 2003). Jian & Dalisay (2018) found that frequent leader-member communication can lead to lower perceptions of role conflict in the workplace. In order to bring out the best in their followers, servant leaders rely on one-on-one communication to understand the abilities, needs, desires, goals, and the potential of their employees (Liden et al., 2008); frequent communication by servant leaders may positively affect work outcomes but it has not been studied.

In order to fulfill their roles, employees need to have clear expectations about their goals (Sawyer, 1992). The clarity of team goals has a large impact on team effectiveness, due in part to more effective team communication (Gladstein, 1984). This facilitates shared vision of individual goals, team goals, and the processes needed for accomplishing team tasks (Hu & Liden, 2011). Goal-setting theory suggests that clear goals lead to improved team performance by directing team members' attention and encouraging members to be persistent (Locke & Latham, 1990). Clear team goals are also important for forming a common team identity, which helps a leader to mobilize team members toward collective goals (Sivunen, 2006).

While servant leadership has been studied in various environments – such as the banking industry (Hu & Liden, 2011), education sector (Parris & Peachey, 2013), food service industry (Liden et al., 2014), government agencies (Schwarz et al., 2016), and military (Bass et al., 2003) – its use in fundraising environments has not been studied. As the fundraising sector grows, due to the increasing need for private support by some non-profit organizations, the need to better understand effective fundraising leadership and outcomes becomes more important. The effects of servant leadership on team performance are relevant in fundraising contexts, particularly major gift fundraising, which is usually performed by teams of fundraisers (Bennett, 2012). In fundraising, like in sales, having clear goals is an important motivator for individuals and helps to determine the ultimate objective for the team. Understanding the ways in which servant leadership, team potency, leader communication frequency, and goal clarity influence fundraiser performance is important for maximizing fundraising results.

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a disruptive event that has had a devastating effect on the workplace and the global community (Hu et al., 2020). This global crisis has generated enormous uncertainty and anxiety that has challenged leaders and forced them to navigate their organizations through uncharted waters. Servant leadership may be helpful during turbulent times, but there has been limited research on its practice during times of crisis (Piorun et al., 2021) and it is just now being studied. Piorun et al. (2021) noted that in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, some academic leaders (e.g. Fernandez and Shaw, 2020) and popular trade publications, such as *Forbes*, identified servant leadership as a necessity to manage the challenging times and the impact on employees. Findings from the limited research on how servant leadership has benefited teams and helped to improve team performance during the pandemic will be presented.

The purpose of this paper is to address these gaps in the literature by conceptually examining whether leader communication frequency and goal clarity strengthen a servant leader's impact on team performance, and whether team

potency mediates the leader’s influence on performance. The combination of moderating factors may have a significant influence on servant leader behavior and team outcomes; understanding how frequent communication and clear goals may benefit teams will enable organizations to better educate and train leaders on these actions. With many leaders and employees continuing to work remotely because of the coronavirus pandemic, there is a greater need for supervisory communication and goal sharing to keep teams on task and performing well. This manuscript also examines the importance of leaders communicating frequently and sharing clear team goals in fundraising settings. These leader behaviors are imperative for fundraising teams to successfully strategize and execute their action plans in order to deepen relationships with constituents and increase donations. This research aims to explain how servant leaders contribute to team performance through the mediating influence of team potency and the moderating influences of leader communication frequency and team goal clarity. A conceptual model illustrating the construct relationships examined in this paper is shown in Figure 1.

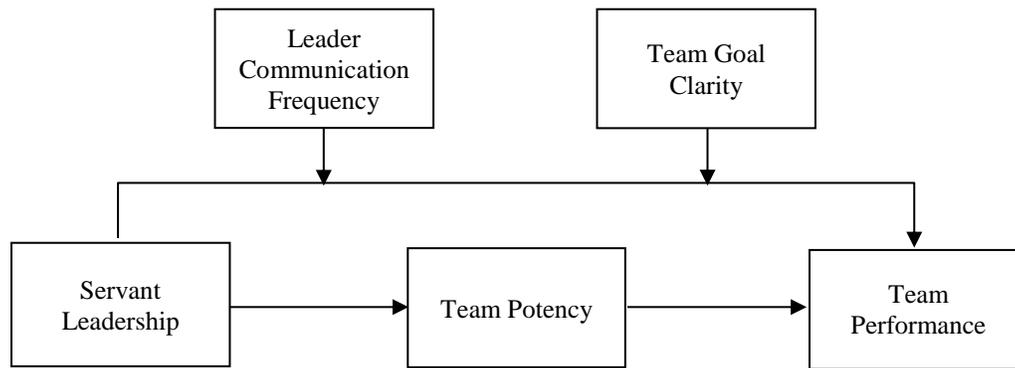


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

LITERATURE REVIEW

Servant Leadership Theory

The notion of servant leadership theory was first proposed by Greenleaf (1970), following his reading of Herman Hesse’s (1956) *Journey to the East*, an inspiring tale about members of a secret society embarking on their own journeys of spiritual enlightenment. The story centers on the character of Leo, who appears first to be a servant, tending to the needs of his fellow travelers, but who is actually the leader of the secret society. Greenleaf (1970) contended that a person can be both servant and leader if they are servant first, ensuring that other people’s needs are being served. Servant leadership has gained interest among scholars and practitioners in the last few decades, partly due to the leadership scandals that have plagued numerous corporations, such as Enron, WorldCom, and Tyco (Sendjaya et al., 2008). It is widely believed that crises of leadership, attributed to unethical behavior among senior management, were to blame for these scandals (Hoch et al., 2016). Hurt & Heath (2017) highlighted that many past leadership failures, including such corporate scandals, are due to a lack of character rather than a lack of competence.

Servant leadership takes into account the fact that traditional forms of leadership are inadequate for motivating people today to follow (Page & Wong, 2000). Liden et al. (2014) noted that servant leadership would become increasingly relevant worldwide, due in part to employees' desire for personal, individualized, and cooperative leadership styles. According to Kiker et al. (2019), the study of servant leadership has exploded over the past few years as practitioners desire more ethical leadership approaches.

The main tenet of servant leadership is that the leader is servant first, putting the needs of followers above their own (Greenleaf, 1970). As Spears (2004) framed it, true servant leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others. While Greenleaf wrote several publications on the concept of servant leadership, he did not provide a specific definition of servant leadership and there has been no consensus on a universal definition since he first presented the theory (Brown & Bryant, 2015; Parris & Peachey, 2013). Laub (2004) proposed a definition that encompasses six key areas – “servant leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led, and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization and those served by the organization” (p. 8). Servant leadership philosophy contends that when leaders' attitudes and actions manifest a desire to serve the interests of all stakeholders (as opposed to primarily serving self-interests), followers experience increased well-being and growth, and themselves adopt a serving-others orientation similar to that of their leader (Panaccio et al., 2015). Previous studies have shown that servant leadership differs from similar leadership theories, such as transformational leadership, in several ways – it involves a focus on followers (rather than on the organization), on external stakeholders like customers, the community and society as a whole (Kiker et al., 2019), on ethical and moral behavior (Hoch et al., 2016), and on forming strong long-term relationships with employees (Liden et al., 2008). In summary, servant leadership is a long-term approach to life and work that has the potential for creating positive change throughout society (Spears, 2004).

In fundraising, where an organization's greatest resource is people (staff, volunteers, donors, and advocates), leadership will define the organization and deliver results (Harris, 2001). Harris (2001) further noted that the servant leadership approach aligns with philanthropy – which means ‘the love of mankind’ – and that, as fundraising is the servant of philanthropy; a case exists for servant leadership to be an appropriate and valuable standard for fundraising leadership. Harris (2001) also contended that the high relational aspect of servant leadership would most likely be successful in fundraising environments.

There have only been a few studies so far on the impact of servant leaders on followers during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Gordon & Xing, 2020; Hu et al., 2020; Piorun et al., 2021; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Sanders & Balcom, 2021). Fernandez & Shaw (2020) stated that traditional models of autocratic leadership are inadequate when faced with the complexities and uncertainties of the pandemic. They noted that the role and the influence of a leader are magnified in times of change. In a crisis, emotional intelligence and

emotional stability will allow a leader to place the interests of others above their own in servant leadership (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Piorun et al. (2021) shared how servant leadership provided leaders at the Lamar Soutter Library at the University of Massachusetts Medical School with a framework from which to support and lead staff through the initial stages of the pandemic. Those authors discussed how the original servant leader characteristics as proposed by Greenleaf (1970) and refined by Spears (2004) are relevant for leaders during the pandemic. For example, they highlighted the importance of *empathy* (being accepting of others and how they respond during times of crisis), *awareness* (being aware of one's self, the situation, the needs and concerns of others, and options for action in moments of uncertainty), *healing* (ensuring the wholeness of the individual and the team; building support systems), *foresight* (intuitive decision-making and planning, which are crucial during the ever-changing nature of the pandemic), and *commitment to growth* (supporting the personal and professional development of team members and helping them reach their full potential, especially during changing circumstances). Gordon & Xing (2020) noted also that leaders and practitioners can help navigate the crisis of COVID-19 by using empathy to help individuals in the workplace to heal. A study by Ruiz-Palomino et al. (2021) found that servant leadership has an important role in reducing depression, thereby improving employee well-being.

Servant Leadership and Team Performance

Studies have shown that servant leadership has positive effects at the organizational, team, and individual levels (Ehrhart, 2004; Irving & Longbotham, 2007; Liden et al., 2014; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Most empirical servant leadership research reviewed by Parris & Peachey (2013) focused on its effect at the unit level (i.e. group or team), which is the level of focus in this paper. A team is defined as two or more people with a specific performance objective or recognizable goal and coordination among team members to attain the team goal or objective (Irving & Longbotham, 2007). Schaubroeck et al. (2011) noted that, because it is conceptualized to be oriented both to groups and to individuals, servant leadership is seen to be especially relevant to team contexts. Servant leadership facilitates team performance because the servant leader creates a positive work environment by engaging in activities such as effectively dealing with the multiple personalities within a group, accepting members for their unique contributions to the group, providing recognition for follower achievements, and creating a unified commitment for team members to rally around (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Performance has been studied in terms of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and team effectiveness (Van Dierendonck, 2011). At the team level, servant leadership involves an exchange process in which leaders help the team by affirming the strengths and potential of the team, as well as providing developmental support for the team as a whole (Hu & Liden, 2011). Team members reciprocate the benefits they have received by exerting effort, which can affect team performance (Hu & Liden, 2011). Abu Bakar & McCann (2018) noted that servant leadership, by its very nature, is well-suited to improve team members' performance because of the "subordinate first" emphasis; the servant leader is

engaged with the individual group member's growth and career development, resulting in better acceptance of group goals and processes. Piorun et al. (2021) also stated that a servant leader's commitment to employee growth leads to increased follower motivation. Liden et al. (2014) found that some of the positive impact of servant leadership on performance was due to the servant leader creating a broader "culture of service" that acts to motivate and inspire followers to perform more effectively. Research by Wang et al. (2018) revealed that servant leadership has a trickle-down effect within an organization, whereby servant leader behaviors by high-level managers flow down to low-level supervisors, in turn promoting employee performance. Schaubroeck et al. (2011) argued that trust in a leader is critical to linking leader behaviors and team performance, and that servant leaders engage in behaviors that inspire their followers' trust. As a practitioner of servant leadership, Blanchard (2001) highlighted the need for leaders to support and care for their staff in order for them to perform well.

While the effect of servant leadership on team performance in fundraising settings has not been studied (Edgington, 2013), Harris (2001) contended that this leadership style is well suited to fundraising, which is a people-focused discipline involving staff, volunteers, donors and advocates. With fundraising programs at some organizations becoming larger and more complex, the expectation for individuals with direct fundraising responsibilities to achieve a high level of performance is also growing (Edgington, 2013). The influence of servant leadership in fundraising contexts is therefore becoming increasingly relevant. Research by Bennett (2012) found that fundraising teams with more members, or with members who had extensive experience in major gift fundraising (MGF), did not perform substantially better than other teams. Therefore, it is possible that positive leadership (such as servant leadership) within an organization could account for improved team performance. This may result from a servant leader's focus on employee needs, recognition, and growth; with these work needs met, fundraisers may be more motivated and better able to meet their performance metrics and develop effective relationships with donors and other constituents. In fundraising units, other factors having a positive influence on team performance include teams with employees committed to the MGF function, team diversity, their communication and relationship nurturing abilities, and their broad connections throughout an organization (Bennett, 2012). Considering the focus that servant leaders maintain on followers, in addition to the "culture of service" they create, this leadership style could positively influence fundraisers and improve fundraising team performance.

Some of the recent literature on the effect of servant leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic discussed the impact on employee and team performance. Piorun et al. (2021) stated that, in their experience, the practice of servant leadership helped staff to remain fully engaged and highly productive. They found that when servant leaders help others develop ways of addressing the negative effects of a crisis, it ultimately leads to more confident, present, and productive employees. Sanders & Balcom (2021) noted that servant leadership develops trust among followers and prevents feelings of isolation, antagonism, and inequality, which in turn leads to enhanced performance. In their study of the effect of servant leadership

on employee depression during the pandemic, Ruiz-Palomino et al. (2021) discussed how depression not only directly decreases worker productivity but may also have other significant consequences, such as loss of interest and goal focus, which can affect employees and their productivity in the long term. The occurrence of depression within a team may lead to reduced levels of team performance, as affected employees may experience low concentration and motivation, among other responses (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). Hu et al. (2020) found that servant leadership is helpful for employees suffering from COVID-19-related anxiety. They noted that when employees experience intense anxiety, they might have impaired information processing, succumb to work slowdowns and distractions, and have weaker motivation to work. Hu et al. (2020) stated that servant leaders are likely more effective in reducing the negative influences of anxiety during the pandemic on job engagement because they lead from the bottom and focus on promoting employee growth. They posit that servant leaders may acknowledge employee uncertainties and concerns, empathize with their anxiety, and affirm their confidence in their employees; those authors also explained that due to their attention to employees' needs, servant leaders show more understanding of anxious employees' situations and provide resources and autonomy for them to manage the situation. As a result, this increased control reduces the negative influences of employees' anxiety on their job engagement (Hu et al, 2020).

Based on the servant leader's positive effect on followers and on an organization's overall environment, in addition to empirical evidence linking servant leadership to individual and team performance, it is proposed that:

Proposition 1: Servant leadership has a positive effect on the performance of fundraising teams.

Team Potency as a Mediator of the Servant Leadership-Team Performance Relationship

While previous studies have examined several mediators between servant leadership and team performance (Liden et al., 2014), researchers are still calling for examination of other potential mediators to better understand the relationship between these constructs (Wang et al., 2018). The mediating influence of team potency may help to explain how servant leadership affects team performance. Potency is an important construct in teamwork literature because of its strong association with team performance (Kennedy et al., 2009). The effect of work team potency has been studied in some contexts; however, research on the role of team potency as a mediating effect on servant leadership outcomes has been very limited. Sivasubramaniam et al. (2002) studied group potency as the process by which leadership affected group performance, but their research focused on shared leadership by a team and not on servant leadership by an individual. Several other studies have shown the positive effect of potency but they did not examine the role of leadership in the relationship. For example, Campion et al. (1993) found that potency beliefs of team members significantly predicted employee satisfaction, team effectiveness, and productivity. A meta-analysis of the relationships between team efficacy, potency, and performance by Gully et al. (2002) showed positive

impacts of potency. A study by Pearce et al. (2002) indicated that higher levels of potency are predictive of higher levels of team effectiveness. Howell & Shea (2006) found the relationship between champion behavior in organizations and team performance was mediated by team potency. In research by Jordan et al. (2002) on the efficacy of group process variables in explaining team performance in military officers, group potency exhibited the most predictive efficacy.

Scholars have identified numerous reasons why potency positively affects team performance. According to Bandura & Locke (2003), a high level of team potency is needed to increase team effectiveness, as it directs members to the common goal, increases their efforts, and enables them to be persistent in adverse situations. High team potency means that members see their capabilities and strategies as being very strong, and this enhances members' motivation because it creates a high expectancy that exerting extra effort will lead to higher performance (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Potency beliefs energize members to work together toward their common goals with tenacity, leading to high levels of team performance (Gully et al., 2002). Potency also raises awareness of team effectiveness among team members by generating a strong sense of team membership (Hu & Liden, 2011). Sivasubramaniam et al. (2002) discussed how shared team transformational leadership can enhance team potency by making participation in a team's efforts more meaningful and tied to the collective identity of the team. In addition, they noted that transformational leadership directly influences team potency by boosting the confidence of team members and developing in them the belief that they will succeed. By comparison, teams managed through less effective leadership styles would fail to establish a clear set of positive shared expectations or a collective effort; consequently, they would not exhibit high levels of potency (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2002). Hu & Liden (2011) found that servant leaders naturally raise team potency through positive motivation techniques. Furthermore, supervisors who engage in servant leadership serve their employees by making sure they understand their work goals and have the tools at their disposal to engage in the process of completing those goals (Hu & Liden, 2011); this in turn raises the level of team potency, facilitating a collaborative team environment. Piorun et al. (2021) stated that servant leaders are active relationship builders, providing opportunities for employees to interact and work with each other; efforts to build community are particularly crucial during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The effects of potency identified in other studies are important in fundraising contexts. The sense of team membership discussed by Hu & Liden (2011) and the focus on a common goal (Bandura & Locke, 2003) may have significant positive outcomes for fundraising teams. This includes collective effort to meet fundraising goals and fundraising team members sharing knowledge about donor prospects and ideas regarding strategies for donor cultivation and solicitation. Other potency effects – such as employee satisfaction, team effectiveness, productivity (Campion et al. 1993), and motivation (Schaubroeck et al., 2011) – would likely be experienced in fundraising teams, as they are in other industries. These effects may work to improve fundraiser morale and performance. Team potency may mediate the effect of servant leadership on fundraising team

performance due to the nature of the teams, which are typically small. Smaller teams may experience fewer communication difficulties and engender higher levels of motivation among participants (Bennett, 2012). Group interactions may be closer and more extensive within smaller teams, possibly leading to greater consensus and satisfaction among participants (Bennett, 2012).

Previous research on the positive impact of potency and on the links between leadership and elevated team potency indicates that servant leadership influences team performance because of team potency. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 2: Team potency positively mediates the relationship between servant leadership and performance of fundraising teams.

Leader Communication Frequency as a Moderator of the Servant Leadership-Team Performance Relationship

There has been increased research on the relationship between communication and job performance (Alexander et al., 1989; Andrews & Kacmar, 2001). Job-relevant communication includes supervisor feedback on performance and information regarding rules and policies, job instructions, work assignments, schedules, and goals (Miles et al., 1996). Leader communication can affect subordinate performance in several ways: 1) by providing job-relevant information that is necessary for effective performance; 2) by providing performance feedback; 3) by providing reinforcement of desired subordinate behavior; and 4) by developing and maintaining a positive interpersonal relationship between the leader and the follower (Alexander et al., 1989). Miles et al. (1996) found that communication with one's superior was a significant predictor of job satisfaction. They contended that such communication reduces role ambiguity and that it typically reduces role conflict; these outcomes may lead to improved job performance. Kacmar et al. (2003) studied the effect of communication frequency on the relationship between LMX and job performance. They found that the beneficial effects of LMX are amplified by communication frequency with the team leader. Research by Gajendran & Joshi (2012) also showed that leader communication frequency strengthens LMX relationships. Supervisors are a frequent source of performance feedback for subordinates (Andrews & Kacmar, 2001). However, if a low frequency of communication limits feedback and developmental attention, then this may create uncertainty, leaving subordinates unable to maximize their job performance (Kacmar et al., 2003). Frequent communication increases the opportunities for team members to communicate and seek feedback from the leader on their knowledge and ideas relevant to team tasks in a positive, supportive, and safe communication context (Gajendran & Joshi, 2012). Even when members feel out of the loop on team communications, frequent communication with the team leader enhances their confidence that they will have a voice in any relevant information or decisions that impact them or their expected contributions to the team (Gajendran & Joshi, 2012). Liden et al. (2008) found that communication exchanges between leaders and their group members are central to the servant

leadership process; however, the effect of servant leader communication frequency on team outcomes has not been studied.

In fundraising environments, frequent communication between a leader and their team is critical in order to share information and updates on constituents and review strategies relating to constituent engagement, solicitation, and stewardship. It also enables feedback regarding donor strategies and progress towards fundraising goals. This information exchange with a leader is necessary in order for fundraisers to achieve their highest levels of performance. Woodhouse (2020) shared that a fundraising leader at Stony Brook University in New York contacted staff weekly regarding fundraising highlights, successes, and challenges; this constant communication led to increased fundraiser performance. During a crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic, constant communication is crucial to team success (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Piorun et al., 2021).

The review of literature on communication frequency and other leadership styles leads to the assumption that frequent communication by servant leaders would strengthen their relationship with followers, leading to improved team performance. Consequently, the following is proposed:

Proposition 3: Leader communication frequency positively moderates the relationship between servant leadership and performance of fundraising teams.

Goal Clarity as a Moderator of the Servant Leadership-Team Performance Relationship

Blanchard (2001) highlighted that the servant aspect of leadership only begins when vision, direction, and goals are clear. Laub (1999) stated that clarifying goals are one of the primary means by which servant leaders provide leadership; furthermore, clearly communicated goals facilitate greater effectiveness in the accomplishment of those goals. Sawyer (1992) defined goal clarity as the extent to which the outcome goals and objectives of the job are clearly stated and well defined. Team goal clarity is essential in order for servant leaders to maximize the performance of each follower and the whole team collectively. Because servant leaders have strong conceptual skills, they emphasize clarity around problems, goals, and strategic direction, thereby giving employees a focus on where they are going and how to achieve success (Liden et al., 2008). Having a clear sense of direction not only inspires confidence in the followers' own abilities but also encourages followers to respond in kind by increasing their job performance (Peterson et al., 2012). Hu & Liden (2011) found that goal clarity enhanced team performance by strengthening team potency. They noted that clear team goals promote the quality of interactions within a team and contribute to the sharing of information and experience, leading to a sense of confidence in the team's capabilities and ultimate success. A study by Anderson & Stritch (2015) provided experimental evidence that task goal clarity is positively related to performance; it reinforced the concept that setting clear goals and objectives for employees is a key function of management and helps to ensure high levels of performance. Locke & Latham (1990) noted that goals enable individuals to single out what is important from the total array of information with

which they are confronted. Kennedy et al. (2009) stated that clear direction and specific, measurable goals enable teams to function more autonomously. Sawyer (1992) found that goal clarity was directly related to job satisfaction, which could influence employee performance. Goal clarity enables team members to understand how their tasks relate to the overall objectives of the team, helping to motivate them to meet team goals (Sawyer, 1992). Research by Irving & Longbotham (2007) found that communicating with clarity was one of six essential servant leadership variables that had the most impact on team effectiveness; results from their study highlighted the importance of leaders communicating plans and objectives clearly.

Vision and goals are fundraisers' most important tools; they not only motivate development officers, they inspire investors (Elder, 2010). Annual goals that are relevant to fundraisers include performance metrics such as the numbers of meetings with donor prospects, donor solicitations completed, and donations received, in addition to the total dollars raised (Edgington, 2013). These metrics are the primary means by which fundraiser performance is evaluated (Woodhouse, 2020). Sawyer (1992) stated that clearly specified goals help managers evaluate performance and then render feedback. It is critical that fundraising leaders share clear goals in order for their employees to continually strive to reach their metric goals, thereby maximizing the productivity of their teams. Woodhouse (2020) noted that while unclear goals can cause mediocre performers to skate by, high-performing fundraising staff often become frustrated, leading to diminishing job satisfaction and high turnover.

Based on previous studies of the effect of goal clarity on job performance, the following proposition is put forth:

Proposition 4: Clarity of team goals positively moderates the relationship between servant leadership and performance of fundraising teams.

DISCUSSION

Servant leadership research has increased in the past few decades and especially in the last few years (Kiker et al., 2019). Numerous effects of this leadership philosophy on job performance have been recorded. Servant leaders' focus on followers can result in employees who are more satisfied, committed, and better performing (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Followers who are empowered, encouraged, and given clarity of focus strive to perform at the highest level (Peterson et al., 2012). There has been limited study of how servant leadership positively influences team performance and the variables that strengthen this relationship. The central focus of this research was to understand whether team potency is a determining factor in the effect of servant leadership on team performance and to examine the impact of leader communication frequency and goal clarity on this relationship.

Theoretical Implications

While previous studies have found a direct relationship between servant leadership and team performance (Hu & Liden, 2011), the model presented in this paper

examined the mediating effect of team potency and the moderating effects of leader communication frequency and goal clarity on the servant leadership-team performance relationship. Although scholars have studied team potency in the context of other types of leadership, the effect of servant leaders on team potency is not well documented. This research proposes that servant leader behaviors help to improve team potency, possibly through the building of trust and long-term relationships with employees (Liden et al., 2008). In turn, higher levels of team potency lead to increased job satisfaction and productivity (Campion et al., 1993). Piorun et al. (2021) noted that, during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the servant leader characteristic of awareness allows for all factors of the crisis and the needs of followers and an organization to be taken into account. It is important to examine the effects of servant leadership, team potency, and their correlating outcomes in fundraising teams as the need for philanthropic support increases for many nonprofits. Leader communication frequency and goal clarity would significantly strengthen the influence of a servant leader on team performance. These factors are critically important for fundraising teams due to the individualized nature of fundraising work. The conceptual model put forward herein provides several testable propositions involving the relationships between the constructs studied, aiding in our overall understanding of servant leadership's influences.

Practical Implications

This research highlights the role of servant leadership, team potency, goal clarity, and leader communication in improving team performance; each of these factors has important implications in the workplace. Peterson et al. (2012) noted that servant leadership may be particularly effective at improving performance by motivating and empowering workers to reach their full potential and feel engaged in a greater cause that benefits a wide range of stakeholders. This is important for fundraisers, who are focused on their organization's mission and on developing networks of donors and advocates to garner support for that mission. As servant leadership not only affects followers but also other constituencies (Kiker et al., 2019), fundraisers employing this form of leadership will likely have a positive influence on their donors and the broader community. Leadership training that focuses on the importance of servant leader behaviors and activities would be beneficial for companies and organizations (Ruiz-Palomino, 2021), along with selecting for servant leadership in the job recruitment process. As noted by Liden et al. (2008), the relationship they identified between the "behaving ethically" dimension of servant leadership and follower job performance suggests that, when filling leadership positions, leaders showing integrity and solid ethics should be selected. Edgington (2013) stated that identifying leadership characteristics that are favorable in fundraising environments assists in the recruitment and placement of top fundraising administrators. Wang et al. (2018) encouraged organizations to incorporate servant leadership modules into high-level managers' training programs. Kiker et al. (2019) further suggested that organizations start with their top management and let the effects of this paradigm flow down throughout all levels of the organization. Schwarz et al. (2016) recommended servant leadership training

encompass a variety of workshops focusing on specific topics (e.g. putting employees first, empowering employees, and helping employees succeed) and role-specific initiatives such as mentoring employees and being mentored, engaging followers in ethical conversations, and performing acts of service at work and in the wider community. When fundraising managers receive targeted training on servant leadership characteristics and behaviors, their relationships with their staff and donors may strengthen; this results from a servant leader's practice of authenticity and their increased focus on others' needs and desires.

Piorun et al. (2021) summarized the servant characteristics of leaders at the Lamar Soutter Library at the University of Massachusetts Medical School during the coronavirus pandemic. They identified the critical importance of *active listening*, a component of leader communication, that should be exercised daily during times of crisis and unpredictability. In the early phases of the pandemic, leaders provided two hour-long meetings weekly to provide updates and allow employees to ask questions, share concerns, and receive support from colleagues (Piorun et al., 2021). Sanders & Balcom (2021) also shared examples of methods used to maintain communication and support employees during the pandemic, including frequent team huddles, daily information sharing on conference calls and virtual meetings, and virtual town halls. Piorun et al. (2021) also discussed the importance of a leader's focus on *healing*, which can help improve employee well-being during crisis times; having dedicated time for individual and team discussions and fostering a safe and stable environment help facilitate healing.

Kennedy et al. (2009) noted that organizations could focus on ways in which to increase team potency, such as by providing organizational support for teamwork. Miles et al. (1996) found that superior-subordinate communication strongly predicts job satisfaction. Consequently, they suggested a need for leaders to consider communication practices as part of any effort to improve job satisfaction, which can lead to improved work performance. Alexander et al. (1989) noted that since communication is both an observable and a changeable leader behavior, understanding the effect of supervisory communication behaviors (including frequency of communication) on subordinates would be very valuable for organizations. Understanding the importance of frequent communication and establishing clear goals would enable fundraising leaders to increase team productivity, morale, and job satisfaction, thereby helping fundraising teams to meet performance metrics and grow their constituent networks.

Limitations

The biggest limitation of this research is that the relationships in the model presented are conceptual and there is a need for their empirical validation. Furthermore, the lack of research on servant leadership, and the effects of mediating and moderating variables, in fundraising settings required some extrapolation from other study contexts. Another limitation of this research is that it reviewed previous studies that had differing levels of analysis regarding the servant leadership relationship; some studies analyzed servant leader behavior by an individual while others focused on leadership at the team or organization level. Kiker et al. (2019)

found the relationship between servant leadership and job performance is stronger when servant leadership is measured at the organization level.

Limitations with each of the other research variables are also identified. Team performance can be difficult to measure and its measurement varies between studies; some research utilizes supervisor ratings, while other research employs self-ratings or team output measures. This variation makes data collection and comparison problematic. Also, different frequencies of leader communication have not been studied, so it is unknown what level of communication has the greatest impact on the servant leader-team performance relationship; the optimal level of communication needs to be identified. Likewise, degrees of goal clarity were not defined or examined; therefore, the influence of this moderator on the overall relationship has not been specified.

An overarching limitation of many previous servant leadership studies is that they have not utilized samples across sectors, such as non-profit, business, education, military, government, and sports. However, Sendjaya et al. (2008) developed a multidimensional measure of servant leadership behavior that included data from for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, content validation data from external reviewers, and an empirical survey of graduate students with full-time or part-time employment. Their sample diversity provided multiple tests of their model and helped establish the validity of servant leadership as a construct.

Future Research Considerations

Empirical research on the mediating and moderating factors examined in this paper is required to validate the propositions presented. As Kennedy et al. (2009) noted, most of the empirical research on potency has used student teams, so little is known about how potency manifests in organizational contexts. Research is needed to better understand how leaders can increase potency within organizations; understanding the antecedents of team potency would help in this regard (Jordan et al., 2002). Future studies should assess the impact of other variables that may influence team performance, including the tenure length of leaders and employees. Schwepker & Schultz (2015) suggested that including specific demographics (age, gender, education, etc.) in research studies could help in understanding the application of servant leadership in current settings, where new college graduates are becoming part of the workforce. Examining the effects of different communication methods (e.g. face-to-face meetings, videoconferencing, email) on team performance would be helpful for practitioners to better understand which method or combination of methods to utilize with team members.

In order to determine the effects of servant leadership and mediating/moderating variables on fundraising teams, empirical data gathered from nonprofit organizations, where fundraisers are employed, is needed. The meta-analysis by Kiker et al. (2019) found that servant leadership had a higher effect on job performance in non-profit settings than in for-profit settings, possibly because nonprofit employees would likely expect a more service-centered leadership style from their leaders. Many nonprofit employees also place value on internal, rather than external, rewards (like personal relationships) that motivate performance (Kiker et al., 2019).

As noted by Hoch et al. (2016), longitudinal research on leadership forms, including servant leadership and its outcomes, is needed because the effect of leadership occurs over time. In addition, further studies on the influence of servant leaders on followers during the COVID-19 pandemic will be beneficial to understanding the effect of this leadership style on team performance in times of crisis and uncertainty. Finally, to examine the generalizability of servant leadership outcomes, future studies should be replicated across different cultural and organizational contexts (Schwarz et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

Servant leadership is gaining popularity among researchers and practitioners due to its positive effects on followers (Kiker et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2014). Servant leaders help to improve team members' performance because of their "follower first" emphasis; they are engaged with the growth and career development of followers, resulting in better acceptance of group goals and processes (Abu Bakar & McCann, 2018). Servant leaders also positively affect performance by creating a "culture of service" within an organization (Liden et al., 2014). They naturally raise team potency through positive motivation techniques and serve their employees by ensuring they understand their work goals and have the tools to complete those goals (Hu & Liden, 2011). Team potency increases team effectiveness as it directs members to the common goal and enables them to be persistent in adverse situations (Bandura & Locke, 2003); it also generates a strong sense of team membership, thereby raising awareness of team effectiveness among members (Hu & Liden, 2011).

The research model proposed here serves as a guide for examining some of the variables that influence the relationship between servant leadership and team performance. The mediating effect of team potency was put forth, in addition to moderating variables (leader communication frequency and goal clarity) that intensify the effects of leadership. In times of great uncertainty and separation of team members, such as that brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, leaders must make greater efforts to maintain levels of team potency and performance. Much of the recent literature on the practice of servant leadership during the pandemic cites the importance of constant leader communication and leader empathy (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Gordon & Xing, 2020; Hu et al., 2020; Piorun et al., 2021; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Sanders & Balcom, 2021); these traits are essential in improving employee well-being and performance during challenging times. For fundraising teams, where job performance is directly related to numerical metrics, it is critical for leaders to communicate expectations and goals in order for team members to perform at their highest level and meet their goals.

Based on previous empirical research, servant leadership has great potential in many more organizations and settings. Spears (2004) noted that a particular strength of servant leadership is that it encourages people to actively seek opportunities to both serve and lead others, creating the potential for raising the quality of life throughout society.

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