



# The Effect of Servant Leadership on Nonprofit Workplace Conflict

Lorena M. Freeborough, Ed.D.

Robert E. Freeborough, Ph.D.

## **Abstract**

*Workplace conflict depletes nonprofit organizations of valuable time and energy. Organizations spend millions of dollars because of the financial and human cost of unresolved interpersonal conflict in the workplace that stem from ineffective leadership behaviors. A leader's ineffective behaviors have been linked to the organizational pressures that can cause and spread counterproductive workplace behavior, which results in interpersonal conflict and great financial cost. The purpose of this quantitative correlational study was to determine the relationship between servant leadership behaviors and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. Specifically, the intended goal of this research was to understand if leaders utilizing a servant leadership style reduced interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Correlational analysis investigated the relationships between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict, using an online survey of 329 nonprofit employees in the United States. Participants completed the Servant Leadership Survey that measures servant leadership behaviors through eight subscales and the Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale that measures interpersonal workplace conflict through four subscales. Overall, results suggested a significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict. The results support the initial hypothesis that higher levels of servant leadership lead to lower levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace.*

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Workplace Conflict, Nonprofit

Organizations spend millions of dollars as a result of the financial and human cost of unresolved interpersonal conflict in the workplace that stem from ineffective leadership behaviors (Hill, 2016; Hyman, 2013; Liu et al., 2015; McKenzie, 2015; Taylor & Pattie, 2014). Detrimental behaviors such as lack of clear communication, bullying, retaliation, and harassment among others have been linked to the organizational pressures that can cause and spread counterproductive workplace behavior which results in interpersonal conflict (Baillien et al., 2014; Leon-Perez et al., 2016; Taylor & Pattie, 2014; Torkelson et al., 2016). A leader's negative actions can influence follower behaviors and organizational culture through role modeling that results in employees' reciprocation of the behavior creating a contentious work environment (Schein, 2010; Torkelson et al., 2016).

By not modeling appropriate behaviors, demonstrating genuine concern, or selflessly helping employees deal with conflict, supervisors can harm organizations by allowing lower forms of social undermining that can result in human and financial loss (Jimmieson et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2015; McKenzie, 2015; Torkelson et al., 2016). As a result of ineffective leadership behaviors in dealing with conflict, organizations can be impacted by the damaging human and financial effects from increased turnover, litigation, workers compensation claims, and absences among other costly consequences (Liu et al., 2015; McKenzie, 2015). Because leaders can greatly influence employee's behaviors, it is of utmost importance that organizations invest in the development of leaders who promote a more peaceful work environment. Characterized by a service ethic, servant leadership theory may help address this problem, as it has been linked to beneficial outcomes at individual and organizational levels (Liden et al., 2014). Individual benefits such as follower trust and engagement have been shown to result from servant leadership as the leader chooses to selflessly serve others to meet their needs, even if it means placing those needs above their own (Simons & Peterson, 2000; van Dierendonck, 2011). By inspiring followers through their kindness and genuine concern, servant leaders may help organizations flourish as follower commitment is strengthened (Greenleaf, 2016; Parris & Peachey, 2013; van Dierendonck, 2011).

Unresolved interpersonal conflict in the workplace can financially impact organizations due to increased turnover, litigations, and workers comp claims among others. If conflict is not resolved effectively, employees may seek alternative ways to resolve or cope with it that may include leaving their organization, suing, or filing worker's compensation claims, all which costs companies thousands of dollars. Some employees seek temporary relief from the psychological stress of workplace conflict by disconnecting from the work environment through sickness absences that may include filing worker's compensation claims (McKenzie, 2015). The cost for organizations to defend an employment lawsuit could range from \$175,000 to \$250,000 depending on whether they settle or decide to go to trial (Hyman, 2013). This supports Virani's (2015) view that when conflict is handled effectively, people feel acknowledged, and this may reduce formal complaints that can lead to costly legal actions. To restore balance in their work lives, some employees may resign or sue their employer, but

others may opt to deal with conflict in a passive-aggressive way by avoiding the workplace altogether.

The negative effects of unresolved interpersonal conflict in the workplace can also be seen in the human cost incurred by organizations resulting from a decrease in productivity, engagement, satisfaction, morale, and commitment. Workplace incivility can cost organizations up to \$14,000 per employee annually due to distractions from work as employees withdraw to avoid an instigator, which affects productivity (Schilpzand et al., 2016). If the instigator is the supervisor, then the problem is exacerbated as the employee tries to avoid or undermine their leadership. Furthermore, it has been reported that employees may take out their frustrations on customers, which further increases the cost to organizations resulting from decreased profits (Schilpzand et al., 2016).

The human costs of unresolved conflict can also be seen in employee burnout and lack of motivation that affects morale and commitment. Halevy et al. (2014) contended that workplace conflict is directly related to anxiety, frustration, and burnout. This has important implications for organizations because when employees experience burnout, they become easily frustrated and are less likely to be engaged and satisfied at work. Furthermore, interpersonal conflict affects employee motivation which can lead to biased processing of information (de Wit, et al., 2013). Relationship conflict affects information processing because of the increased time that employees spend on each other rather than on the work, which results in poor performance in the long-term. Information processing is also impacted by individuals involved in relationship conflict, who may withhold information or provide a lower exchange of information with their coworkers and supervisor to reciprocate or retaliate the bad behavior (Jimmieson, et al., 2017; Humphrey, et al., 2017).

Healthy conflict that leads to stronger personal relationships and increased creativity can be good for organizations, but the cost of unresolved conflict to organizations can cause significant negative outcomes. Having some conflict can promote creativity and innovation, low levels of information exchange resulting from interpersonal conflict negatively impacts performance over time (Jung and Lee, 2015; Humphrey et al., 2017). Furthermore, social learning theory posits that individuals learn by observing and replicating other's behaviors (Bandura, 1977), which implies that as individuals observe their supervisor's or coworker's negative behavior, they will imitate it, resulting in indirect sabotage and biased decision-making that eventually leads to a greater cost to the organization (Humphrey et al., 2017; Torkelson et al., 2016).

Scholars have investigated workplace conflict from various perspectives such as work-related stress (Sardana, 2018), lack of effective feedback (Madalina, 2016), and a lack of communication (Syed & Zia, 2013); all of which have been found to lead to sickness, depression, low productivity and damaged relationships. Because leaders are often regarded as role models, their leadership style and ability to manage conflict well can have a significant impact on the culture, health and function of an organization (Jit, Sharma & Kawatra, 2016; Torkelson et al., 2016). While many studies have sought to understand the implications of conflict in the workplace (Brubaker, et al., 2014; Bruk-Lee, et al., 2013; de Wit et al., 2013;

Humphrey et al., 2017), further research is needed to investigate the impact of a supervisor's leadership behaviors on interpersonal conflict (Brubaker et al., 2014; Gilin Oore et al., 2015). While other theories such as transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership emphasize ethics, organizational outcomes, and follower wellbeing, their motivation and focus are on the leader's values, rules, and goals that may lead to manipulation, narcissism, and other selfish acts (Eva et al., 2019; Graham, 1991; van Dierendonck, 2011). In contrast, servant leadership theory has a moral and selfless component that focuses on genuinely caring about follower's growth and needs which enhances interpersonal trust and respect (Graham, 1991; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Spears, 2004). Because servant leader behaviors have been shown to enhance key elements of effective conflict management such as collaboration, communication, trust and respect among followers (Fields, 2018; Jit et al., 2017, Joseph, 2006; Simons & Peterson, 2000), this leadership style may prove to be the most effective way to create a peaceful organizational culture that has minimal workplace conflict. Exploring the effect of servant leader behavior on interpersonal workplace conflict can help organizations effectively fulfill their mission while reducing the negative consequences that come from unresolved interpersonal conflict. Thus, it is imperative for organizations to understand how the servant leadership style may impact workplace conflict.

While past studies have studied the relationship between servant leadership and conflict management styles (Fields, 2018; Joseph, 2006), little is known about the effect of servant leadership on interpersonal workplace conflict. By exploring how servant leadership behaviors influence organizational interpersonal conflict, practitioners may harness characteristics that are conducive to creating an organizational culture that reduces the effects of this stressor on employee strain, resulting in a more peaceful and productive work environment. The purpose of this quantitative correlational study was to determine the relationship between servant leadership behaviors and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. The intended goal of this research was to understand if leaders utilizing a servant leadership style reduced interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Specifically, this study examined the relationship between the subscales of servant leadership (standing back, forgiveness, courage, empowerment, accountability, authenticity, humility, and stewardship) and the subscales of interpersonal workplace conflict (task outcome, task process, relationship, non-task organizational conflict). A sample of 327 nonprofit employees in the United States was asked to complete a questionnaire that had questions from the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) that measures servant leadership (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2010) and the Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale (ICOS) that measures interpersonal workplace conflict (Lee, 2007).

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: What is the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings?

- H1<sub>0</sub>: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.
- H1<sub>A</sub>: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.
- H1<sub>10</sub>: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.
- H1<sub>1A</sub>: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.
- H1<sub>20</sub>: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.
- H1<sub>2A</sub>: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.
- H1<sub>30</sub>: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.
- H1<sub>3A</sub>: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.
- H1<sub>40</sub>: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of non-task organizational conflict.
- H1<sub>4A</sub>: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task non-task organizational conflict.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Social Learning Theory and Social Exchange Theory**

Social learning theory and social exchange theory support this study's theoretical framework through a servant leadership perspective. Bandura (1977) proposed that human behaviors are learned by direct personal experience or by observation. Observational learning is governed by four behavioral modeling processes: attentional, retention, reproduction, and motivational (Bandura, 1977). A major component of the four behavioral modeling processes that results in observational learning is frequency of association; in other words, the role model with whom an individual regularly interacts with and learns from will determine the "types of behavior that will be repeatedly observed and learned most thoroughly" (Bandura, 1977, p. 24). This is of great importance to this study because it explains how through role modeling effective behaviors, servant leaders can change and improve follower behavior through frequent interaction. Furthermore, in modeling selfless behaviors when dealing with conflict that results in successful conflict resolution, employees will learn and emulate these behaviors, as individuals are "more likely to adopt modeled behavior if it results in outcomes they value" (Bandura, 1977, p. 28).

The second theoretical framework of this study is social exchange theory, specifically as it relates to Gouldner's (1960) norm of reciprocity. Proposed in the mid-1900s, Sociologist George C. Homans posited that the social interaction between two people involves behavioral transactions of rewards or punishment that are exchanged within the relationship (McRay, 2015). Gouldner (1960) expounded on this theory to include reciprocity, which is the moral obligation to return a benefit, without doing harm in return that is done out of personal obligation or gratitude, based on mutual trust. The expectation to reciprocate favors brings stability to social systems through the behavioral transactions of individuals who are indebted to each other (Gouldner, 1960). Emerson (1976) furthered this theory and proposed that productive exchange, which he calls "reinforcement," happens at the macro-level within large exchange networks that establish the norms of the exchanges and, "takes the movement of valued things (resources) through social process as its focus" (p. 359). The significance of this theory for this study is the leader-employee relationship will be stabilized as each party regulates their behavior as a means of repayment. This can be in the form of positive behaviors to repay a favor or negative behaviors to bring stability to the perceived moral injustice of not returning a benefit.

### **Organizational Conflict**

A growing interest in the study of organizational conflict has steadily increased in the last 50 years (Caputo et al., 2019; Deutsch, 1973; Thomas & Schmidt, 1976). Scholars have realized that conflict is not only essential to an organization's existence, it is the essence of it (Pondy, 1992). This is because as individuals come together to carry out common tasks, they form interdependent relationships that increases the chances of minor disagreements that can lead to major interpersonal conflict (Deutsch, 1973; Garner & Poole, 2013; Spector & Jex, 1998). Scholars agree that dealing with conflict in the workplace is inevitable, time-consuming, and costly if managed ineffectively (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). As a result of the amount of time leaders spend in dealing with conflict, researchers have focused on understanding its source, nature, outcomes, management, and resolution (Caputo et al., 2019; Jehn, 1997; Thomas & Schmidt, 1976).

Seminal works of organizational conflict were first introduced by Blake and Mouton (1964) who declared that "every manager carries on his own shoulders responsibility for solving human problems associated with achieving maximum results through the productive utilization of people. The question is, how can this be best accomplished?" (p. ix). Through their development of the managerial grid, the authors provided the social sciences the first conceptual framework for handling interpersonal conflict. This framework was later tested and reexamined by Thomas and Kilmann (1978) who confirmed the need for managers to handle conflict effectively and spearheaded the quest to better understand interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Consequently, researchers undertook the challenge of extending the literature on conflict by seeking to define and distinguish its typology to better understand how leaders can manage and resolve it effectively.

The most comprehensive definition of interpersonal conflict was proposed by Barki and Hartwick (2004) as a "dynamic process that occurs between

interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with attainment of their goals” (p. 234). Scholars have agreed on three important aspects of this definition that encompass interpersonal conflict: perception, differences among individuals, and negative emotions. Budd et al. (2020) affirmed in his definition of conflict that the apparent differences can be either real or imagined and Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2013) asserted that the expression of frustration among individuals can be subtle or overt as a result of unfulfilled goals. Scholars have been able to address the sources of conflict by understanding the literature that conceptualizes workplace conflict (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). This understanding identifies conflict as an individual’s perception of another’s disruptive actions that hinder the attainment of their goals, resulting in negative emotions (Budd et al., 2020; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). By accurately assessing the source of interpersonal conflict, researchers are better able to understand how to manage and resolve it effectively to minimize its negative outcomes.

Decreasing stress caused by interpersonal conflict in the workplace has been a major topic of interest among researchers since 2005 (Caputo et al., 2019). Conflict management has been described as a coping mechanism that restrains the negative aspects of conflict while enhancing a culture of strong employee relations that includes fairness, trust, and mutual respect (De Dreu et al., 2004; “Managing Workplace Conflict,” 2020; Virani, 2015). Scholars have agreed that when conflict is managed competently, it increases the quality of relationships because individuals feel listened to, are treated fairly and given the opportunity to voice their concerns (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013; Virani, 2015). In opposition to the benefits of managing conflict constructively, research has found that ineffective conflict management has negative long-term consequences that can affect individual health and wellbeing through increased feelings of burnout (De Dreu et al., 2004). Therefore, it is of utmost importance for organizations to create and nurture a culture of effective conflict management among employees.

### **Servant Leadership**

Robert Greenleaf presented the theory of the servant as a leader in the early 1970s after reading a book which transformed his life as he identified with “Leo,” the main character who was a leader that influenced his companions through his service, nobility and presence (Greenleaf, 1977). Based on this story, Greenleaf suggested that a true leader is driven and motivated to meet others’ needs, serve them and place those needs above their own (van Dierendonck, 2011). Since Greenleaf first wrote his essay in 1970, many authors have tried to bring clarity to what servant leadership is in an attempt to dispel any confusion regarding its definition (Eva et al., 2019; Spears, 1996; van Dierendonck, 2011). In one way or another, these scholars have tried to address and expound Greenleaf’s (1977) definition of a servant leader. Being an others-oriented leadership style, characterized by caring, selfless behaviors, the literature reflects that servant leadership outcomes have a direct positive influence for organizations at the individual, team, and organizational levels. Specifically, the increase in the literature has shown strong empirical support for the assumptions that leaders using

a servant leadership style increase work engagement and commitment (individual level), organizational citizenship behavior (team level), and performance (organizational level; Coetzer et al., 2017).

Individuals under a servant leadership style benefit from increased well-being resulting from higher satisfaction, better relationships, and work engagement. Coetzer et al. (2017) contended that as servant leaders display authenticity, humility, compassion, accountability, courage, altruism, integrity, and good listening skills, individuals are impacted through increased commitment, satisfaction, creativity, and work-life balance. Chiniara and Bentein (2016) supported this finding and further explain that one of the reasons why followers are more satisfied under a servant leader is because they feel that “their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are being met” (p. 135). When employees experience satisfaction in their relationship with their supervisors and co-workers, they are free to be creative, enhancing their job satisfaction which results in increased commitment to the organization. Consequently, employees will have an increased sense of empowerment that motivates them to exhibit servant leader behaviors themselves, impacting the entire organization.

As employees feel empowered by their servant leader, they become more engaged, which increases their creativity and involvement in their work. Studies have shown that servant leadership behaviors directly result in empowerment of their followers (Stone et al., 2004; Van Winkle et al., 2014) which increases their engagement and commitment to achieve higher organizational goals (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Yang et al., 2017). This may be due to employees feeling valued and trusted as they are empowered to do their work independently (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016). In turn, when individuals feel autonomy in the way they do their jobs, and that their supervisor trusts them to get their work done, they will reciprocate their supervisor’s trust and strive to succeed in meeting their goals (Gouldner, 1960; Simons & Peterson, 2000). This puts their focus on the work itself rather than on the interpersonal conflict that can stem from working in teams.

Organizations can benefit from significant positive outcomes that come as a byproduct of leaders who reflect servant leadership behaviors. Recent studies found that servant leadership creates an ethical culture in organizations that increases corporate social responsibility at all levels of the organization (Burton et al., 2017; Sengupta & Sengupta, 2018). As servant leaders foster trust through their authentic and ethical behavior, employees adjust their behavior accordingly because they know their leader will provide justice in whatever the situation may be. This transparency and clarity create an ethical climate that not only helps address conflict quickly, but reduces turnover through increased engagement, commitment, and performance.

Studies have directly linked servant leadership with increased work engagement and performance. Yang et al. (2017) confirmed that as leaders reflect authentic concern for their follower’s development by supporting and mentoring them, their engagement in their work increases. When employees are engaged, they are more likely to be committed to the success of the organization (van Dierendonck et al., 2014) which leads to increased employee performance (Coetzer et al., 2017).



By putting the needs of the employees first and genuinely helping them to grow and develop, servant leaders can improve organizational outcomes at all levels by engaging their employees in a way that impacts what they do and the strength of their desire to accomplish great things. Arguably, these findings point to a greater organizational benefit that most employers will agree to be an undeniably important factor that keeps their organizations going: a workforce of engaged, committed, and satisfied employees that is created by implementing a servant leadership culture.

Employee dissatisfaction that results in leaving an organization can be mitigated through an atmosphere of servant leadership. It is often said that individuals join companies but leave managers. Several studies have found that servant leadership behaviors reduce employee turnover intentions and employee dissatisfaction (Coetzer et al., 2017; Hunter et al., 2013; Liden et al., 2014; Terosky & Reitano, 2016). This may be as a result of the leader's genuine concern for the follower's growth and well-being that reduces dissatisfaction and disengagement as followers reciprocate the leader's selfless behavior (Hunter et al., 2013; Terosky & Reitano, 2016). As employees identify with the leader and reciprocate their others-oriented behavior it gives them a sense of purpose that reduces the likelihood of looking for another job (Liden et al., 2014). When employees enjoy and love what they do, and genuinely care for one another in a way that helps further their efforts collectively, they are more effective and less burned out by the demands of their jobs (Coetzer et al., 2017; Liden et al., 2014). If servant leaders have a positive impact on employee's desire to stay with the company, not only will organizations benefit from an engaged and stable workforce, but from a workforce that is committed to each other and to work issues out in a healthy and amicable way.

## METHOD

This study used a quantitative correlational, nonexperimental approach to test whether servant leadership resulted in lower levels of workplace conflict in nonprofit organizations across the United States. The research design was cross-sectional in nature, resulting in a point in time examination of the data. The quantitative correlational approach was best suited for this study because it examined the nature and direction of the relationship among two variables to predict future outcomes (Locke et al., 2010; Yilmaz, 2013).

### Population

The population studied for this research study were adult employees of nonprofit organizations in the United States. Smith et al. (2004) asserted that servant leaders are preferred for more static and stable environments, which are conducive to the steady growth of followers, and include nonprofit, volunteer, and religious organizations that tend to attract individuals who seek significant opportunities for personal growth. Ghosh and Khatri (2018) agreed that service organizations are conducive to the modeling of servant leadership, where leaders encourage their employees to serve others and put the customers' needs above their own. Due to the service nature of nonprofit organizations, it is more likely to find leaders who display servant leader behaviors that are others-oriented and selfless (Liden et al., 2014). Therefore, employees in nonprofit organizations who seek meaningful work

and opportunities for growth will be able to evaluate their leaders' behaviors as it relates to servant leadership and report on the levels and frequency of interpersonal conflict they have experienced under that type of leadership.

### **Study Sample**

Simple random probability sampling method was used in this study, which ensures unbiased sampling by giving everyone in the population a reasonable chance of being included in the sample and then drawing at random from the population (Kline, 2017; Muijs, 2016). A suitable sample size for this study was calculated at a minimum of 273 subjects based on G\*Power version 3.1.92 calculations with the following parameters: one-tailed test, expected correlation of .15, alpha equal to .05, and power of .80. Furthermore, to increase the likelihood of successful results, this target number was raised by 20% to 327 participants.

The target sample were adults 18 years old or older, who had been employed full-time (at least 40 hours weekly) in nonprofit organizations under a supervisor who had been in their role for at least 1 year in the United States. Since it is assumed that leaders are usually full-time, it was expected that those who are employed full-time (18 years old is the typical age individuals begin full-time employment) had a greater likelihood of observing their respective leader's overall behaviors and could answer more accurately than those who were part-time and could only see a percentage of their leader's behaviors. Random probability sampling was used to select the sample for this study regardless of the individual demographics, organization size, nonprofit type, location within the United States, or type of industry. The web-based questionnaire administration service, SurveyMonkey, was used to create and distribute the survey via a customized hyperlink to a selected panel of participants who had self-identified as working for nonprofit organizations in the United States among 20+ million people who take SurveyMonkey surveys per month (SurveyMonkey, 2020).

### **Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale**

Interpersonal workplace conflict was measured using Lee's (2007) Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale (ICOS). This scale is a reliable and valid measure of interpersonal conflict in organizations that was developed as a response to scholars' call for an instrument that assessed the three definitional components of conflict as conceptualized by Barki and Hatwick (2004): disagreement, interference, and negative emotion. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the ICOS conflict subscales ranged from .91-.93, making this instrument a highly reliable measurement of interpersonal conflict in the workplace (Lee, 2007). Validity correlations were computed for the ICOS through factorial and regression analysis that demonstrated moderate to strong levels of convergent and construct validity, respectively (Lee, 2007).

The ICOS built on earlier instruments and extended previous measurements (ICAWS, Jehn's 1995 Conflict Scales) to include two additional subscales (task process and non-task conflict). The original ICOS instrument measures four types of interpersonal conflict in the workplace which includes a total of 63 questions: task outcome (16 items), task process (16 items), relationship conflict (15 items),

non-task organizational conflict (16 items; Lee, 2007). This study used the disagreement subscales for the shortened version of 20 questions: task outcome (5 items), task process (5 items), relationship conflict (5 items), non-task organizational conflict (5 items; Lee, 2007). Participants responded to 20 items in the ICOS, using a 5-point Likert type scale with responses ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Every Day.

### **Servant Leadership Survey**

Servant leadership was measured using van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) original 30-item Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) because it included three subscales that were vital to determining the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict: accountability, forgiveness, and courage. These three subscales were important in determining whether followers were growing, if the leader was ethical and was creating an environment of trust where interpersonal conflict could be managed effectively (Simons & Peterson, 2000; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The SLS measured eight of the core constructs of servant leadership which included standing back (3 items), forgiveness (3 items), courage (2 items), empowerment (7 items), accountability (3 items), authenticity (4 items), humility (5 items) and stewardship (3 items; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Participants were asked to rate how they perceived the leadership behaviors of their direct supervisor by responding to 30 items in the SLS, using a 6-point Likert type scale with responses ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

This study followed a nonexperimental method that utilized a survey research design (Muijs, 2016). Four hundred sixty-four people responded to an invitation e-mail by clicking on the hyperlink to participate in the study. Of the 464 who began the survey, 438 consented to participate in the study. The first two questions of the survey served to ensure respondents have worked for a nonprofit for at least one year and worked under supervisors who have been in their capacity for at least one year. Of the 464 consenting participants, 374 were 18 years of age and older, indicating they were both currently working for a nonprofit for at least one year and their supervisor had been in their capacity for at least one year. Of the 374 qualified participants, 329 answered all questions. The response rate of those who clicked on the link to participate in the survey ( $n = 464$ ) to those who fit the inclusion criteria and answered all questions ( $n = 329$ ) was 71%. The total number of responses ( $n = 329$ ) meets the desired sample size for this study ( $n = 327$ ), calculated using G\*Power at a minimum of 273 subjects multiplied by 20% to increase the likelihood of successful results.

Demographic questions for this study included age and gender. Participants were well-distributed across all age groups. The age groups most represented were 30-44 years (34%) and 45-60 years (28%), while 19% were between 18 and 29 years and 19% over 60 years. Furthermore, 77% of participants were female ( $n = 252$ ), while 23% were male ( $n = 75$ ).

## RESULTS

### Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha were calculated for each subscale of servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict. The ability of an instrument to give consistent and reliable results is indicated by Cronbach's alpha scores above .7 (Field, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013). Cronbach's Alpha scores for all SLS and ICOS subscales ranged from .80 to .95, indicating high internal consistency for both instruments as reliable tools that measure servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict.

### Presentation of Findings

A Spearman's rank-order correlation ( $r_s$ ) was run to determine the relationship between supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and the levels of interpersonal workplace conflict of 329 nonprofit employees in the United States. There was a negative correlation between supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and the levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace, which was statistically significant ( $r_s = -.338, p = .001$ ).

A Spearman's rank-order correlation ( $r_s$ ) was also conducted to determine the relationship between supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and each of the interpersonal workplace conflict subscales. The results are shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: *Correlational Analysis using Spearman's rho for SLS and ICOS*

Servant Leadership Subscale	Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Subscale			
	Task Outcome	Task Process	Relationship Conflict	NTO Conflict
Empowerment				
Correlation Coefficient	-.279*	-.270*	-.193*	-.313*
Significance	.001	.001	.001	.001
Standing Back				
Correlation Coefficient	-.247*	-.229*	-.154*	-.301*
Significance	.001	.001	.003	.001
Accountability				
Correlation Coefficient	-.146*	-.117	-.170*	-.210*
Significance	.004	.017	.001	.001
Forgiveness				
Correlation Coefficient	-.334*	-.351*	-.298*	-.393*
Significance	.001	.001	.001	.001
Courage				
Correlation Coefficient	.084	.044	.081	.043
Significance	.064	.214	.071	.218

Servant Leadership Subscale	Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Subscale			
	Task Outcome	Task Process	Relationship Conflict	NTO Conflict
Authenticity				
Correlation Coefficient	-.167*	-.186*	-.094	-.222*
Significance	.001	.001	.044	.001
Humility				
Correlation Coefficient	-.235*	-.264*	-.163*	-.281*
Significance	.001	.001	.002	.001
Stewardship				
Correlation Coefficient	-.266*	-.279*	-.196*	-.315*
Significance	.001	.001	.001	.001

Note. All coefficients are significant at \* $p < .004$ , one-tailed.  $n = 329$ . NTO = Non-Task Organizational Conflict

Table 2: Correlation Display Matrix

Empowerment	1														
Standing Back	0.726*	1													
Accountability	0.504*	0.400*	1												
Forgiveness	0.492*	0.532*	0.223*	1											
Courage	0.189*	0.092	0.142	-0.196*	1										
Authenticity	0.621*	0.625*	0.369*	0.384*	0.285*	1									
Humility	0.734*	0.729*	0.390*	0.529*	0.171*	0.709*	1								
Stewardship	0.720*	0.636*	0.494*	0.496*	0.222*	0.657*	0.713*	1							
Task Outcome Conflict	-0.279*	-0.247*	-0.146*	-0.334*	0.084	-0.167*	-0.235*	-0.266*	1						
Task Process Conflict	-0.27*	-0.229*	-0.117	-0.351*	0.044	-0.186*	-0.264*	-0.279*	0.711*	1					
Relationship Conflict	-0.193*	-0.154*	-0.170*	-0.298*	0.081	-0.094	-0.163*	-0.196*	0.593*	0.649*	1				
Non-Task Org Conflict	-0.313*	-0.301*	-0.210*	-0.393*	0.043	-0.222*	-0.281*	-0.315*	0.579*	0.635*	0.641*	1			
													1		
														0.8	
															0.6
															0.4
															0.2
															0
															-0.2
															-0.4
															-0.6
															-0.8
															1
															-1

Note. All coefficients are significant at \* $p < .004$ .

Data were collected via SurveyMonkey and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics v27. Of the initial 464 participants who began the survey, 329 qualified and answered all questions. The majority of the participants were female (77%) and the age group most represented were 30-44 years of age (34%). Reliability and

internal consistency of the two instruments was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, mean, and standard variation. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .80 to .95, indicating high internal consistency reliability. Correlational analysis was conducted using Spearman's Rank Order ( $r_s$ ) with levels of significance at  $p < .004$  for each of the subscales of servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict. There was a negative correlation between supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and the levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace, which was statistically significant ( $r_s = -.338, p = .001$ ).

Correlational analysis revealed that there was an overall statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership behaviors and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings. Therefore, the null hypothesis ( $H_{I0}$ ) was rejected. Findings also revealed that there was not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of accountability and lower levels of task process; higher levels of courage and all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, non-task organizational conflict), and higher levels of authenticity and lower levels of relationship conflict. Despite these results, correlational analysis revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between servant leadership and all four subscales of interpersonal workplace conflict (SLS/Task Outcome  $r_s = -.299, p = .001$ ; SLS/Task Process  $r_s = -.300, p = .001$ ; SLS/Relationship Conflict  $r_s = -.209, p = .001$ ; SLS/NTO Conflict  $r_s = -.356, p = .001$ ). The research hypothesis test results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: *Summary of the Hypotheses Tested*

Hypothesis	Result	Description
$H_{I0}$	Rejected	There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.
$H_{IA}$	Not Rejected	There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.
$H_{I10}$	Rejected	There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.
$H_{I1A}$	Not Rejected	There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.
$H_{I20}$	Rejected	There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.

Hypothesis	Result	Description
<i>H1<sub>2A</sub></i>	Not Rejected	There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.
<i>H1<sub>30</sub></i>	Rejected	There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.
<i>H1<sub>3A</sub></i>	Not Rejected	There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.
<i>H1<sub>40</sub></i>	Rejected	There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of non-task organizational conflict
<i>H1<sub>4A</sub></i>	Not Rejected	There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task non-task organizational conflict

## DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

For the sample used in this study, the results of the Spearman's rho correlations were negatively related for each variable. This means that there is a significant negative relationship between servant leadership, as defined by the SLS scale, and interpersonal conflict in the workplace, as defined by the ICOS scale. This suggests that as servant leadership increases in organizations, interpersonal workplace conflict decreases. The results of the Spearman's rho correlations were negatively related for all servant leadership subscales, except for courage; with forgiveness having the strongest relationship, followed by stewardship, and finally empowerment. Servant leadership behaviors of forgiveness, stewardship, empowerment, standing back, accountability, authenticity, and humility were all negatively and significantly correlated with each of the four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales: task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict. Consequently, the anticipated results of a negative relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict were met.

### Forgiveness

As defined in the SLS scale, forgiveness lets go of past wrongdoings through interpersonal acceptance when faced with offenses, argument, and mistakes; it is about forgiving others while having empathy and understanding their perspectives through behaviors of warmth and compassion (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). In this study, forgiveness was negatively and significantly correlated with all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). This dimension had the highest

correlation of all subscales, signifying that the more servant leaders let go of their employees' past wrongdoings, forgive offenses and mistakes, while seeking to understand with an attitude of empathy, acceptance, warmth and compassion, the less their followers will experience interpersonal conflict stemming from disagreements regarding work task performance, how duties are done, due to a lack of relational trust, or disagreements regarding differences in organizational leadership.

### **Stewardship**

This dimension was measured by a manager's focus on social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork, as well as a manager's long-term vision and how much they emphasize the importance of focusing on the good of the whole (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Stewardship was negatively and significantly correlated with all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). This subscale had the second highest correlation, signifying that the more servant leaders communicate a long-term vision, emphasize the good of the whole, and stimulate followers to act in the common interest of all to enhance social responsibility, conflict regarding work tasks, performance, and relationship and organizational differences is greatly reduced.

Several studies confirm that servant leadership creates a service culture that increases corporate social responsibility and organizational citizenship behaviors at all levels of the organization as employees personally identify with the organization's service climate and work towards enhancing organizational outcomes that decreases their desire to leave the organization or create conflict for others (Burton et al., 2017; Coetzer et al., 2017; Sengupta & Sengupta, 2018). When employees are committed and motivated to help one another for the good of the whole, a problem-solving mindset leads them to "proactively make suggestions and recommendations to address organizational issues" thereby reducing unhelpful, antisocial behaviors (Lapoint & Vandenberghe, 2018, p. 111).

### **Empowerment**

As defined by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) in the SLS scale, empowerment "aims at fostering a pro-active, self-confident attitude among followers and gives them a sense of personal power" (p. 251). In this study, empowerment was negatively and significantly correlated with all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). This subscale had the third-highest correlation, signifying that the more servant leaders shift authority and share power with their employees, the less their followers engage in interpersonal conflict stemming from differences regarding a work task, its process, differences in personality, and/or because of poor organizational leadership. From a social learning perspective, Hunter et al. (2013) and Song et al. (2015) explained that by modeling desirable servant leadership qualities of helping others and sharing information, servant leaders create a culture of empowerment that encourages and promotes helping behaviors amongst followers. As servant leaders seek to develop others, they build community by



sharing leadership which creates a caring organizational environment that is high in trust and morale, which is a key moderator in the escalation of conflict (Laub, 1999; Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2014; Simmons & Peterson, 2000).

### **Standing Back**

This dimension of servant leadership is “about the extent to which a leader gives priority to the interest of others first and gives them the necessary support and credits... it is also about retreating into the background when a task has successfully been accomplished” (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011, p. 252). Standing back was negatively and significantly correlated with all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). This suggests that as servant leaders keep themselves in the background and give credit to others, do not chase after recognition or rewards, and enjoys their colleagues’ success more than their own, their organizations will experience less disagreements regarding what, how, and when tasks should be done because of personal dislikes or resulting from disagreements over organizational-related issues. This finding may be explained by the selfless nature of servant leaders. Chiniara and Bentein (2018) confirmed that as servant leaders put the needs of followers above their own self-interest, their collective performance is enhanced through the high-quality leader-member relationships that are formed.

### **Accountability**

This subscale is about ensuring employees know what is expected of them, while holding them responsible for the results; it is also a “powerful tool to show confidence in one’s followers” (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011, p. 252). Accountability was negatively and significantly correlated with three of the four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict); but not significantly correlated with task process conflict. The results indicate that as servant leaders set clear expectations for their employees’ work and hold them responsible for the results, interpersonal conflict regarding the goals of work outcomes, relational and organizational issues are reduced, while conflict regarding how and when a work task should be performed is not significantly affected.

### **Courage**

This subscale was measured by how much risk a manager takes when trying new approaches and facing challenges regardless of opposition; this is done by strongly relying on personal values and convictions as a guide to one’s actions (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Courage had a nonsignificant correlation with the four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales. This suggests that interpersonal conflict in the workplace is not affected by whether or not managers take risks to accomplish goals when facing opposition.

### **Authenticity**

This subscale was measured by how transparent managers are both privately and publicly, how open they are about their weaknesses, and how much they express

their true feelings to those around them (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Authenticity was negatively and significantly correlated with three of the four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, and non-task organizational conflict); but not significantly correlated with relationship conflict. The results indicate that when managers are open about their limitations and express their feelings to their staff when they are touched by events surrounding them, there is a diminishing of disagreements regarding the goals of a work task, the process of duties performed, and disputes over organizational-related issues, while conflict regarding relationships and differences in personality is not significantly affected.

### **Humility**

This subscale was measured by the ability of a manager to not only admit mistakes and recognize weaknesses, but learn from them and accept critical feedback (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Humility was negatively and significantly correlated with all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). The results suggest that when leaders receive criticism or make mistakes, they publicly make an effort to try to learn from them; thereby reducing disagreements regarding incompatible ideas of the outcome of a work task, how work should be performed, company policies, and relationship differences.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study show that leaders influence the nature and strength of the relationship between their behaviors and their employees' engagement in interpersonal workplace conflict. More precisely, the findings indicate that there is a negative association between servant leadership characteristics and workplace conflict, which suggests that servant leaders may help reduce interpersonal conflict through behaviors of forgiveness, stewardship, empowerment, humility, humbleness, accountability, and authenticity. A major finding of this study revealed that through behaviors of forgiveness, managers augment trust by showing acceptance, compassion, and empathy (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Furthermore, because one of the major sources of workplace conflict is when leaders fail to intervene and provide support for employees to effectively address counterproductive workplace behavior (Deutsch, 1973; Jaramillo et al., 2011; O'Sullivan, 2017); this study shows the importance of leaders to role model servant leadership behaviors that can be learned and reciprocated, as employees may engage in retaliatory behavior due to unresolved conflict (Bandura, 1977; Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006; Gouldner, 1960).

Servant leaders are essential to creating a harmonious environment in the workplace. Bruk-Lee and Spector (2006) confirmed that as a result of conflict with a supervisor, employees reported higher levels of negative emotions, which increased their counterproductive behaviors at work. Because servant leaders display more humane, empathetic, and open communication skills, they establish trusting relationships with their employees that can mitigate the consequences of interpersonal conflict in the workplace (Jit et al., 2016; Joseph, 2006). Furthermore,

because high emotionality and low trust can escalate conflict (Jehn, 1997; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Yang & Mossholder, 2004), through humility and their selfless and others-oriented behaviors, servant leaders can minimize the effects of the dysfunctional, emotional conflict by helping them reduce negative emotional responses and destructive behavioral manifestations (Joseph, 2006; Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2006).

### **Culture**

The implications of this study's findings are of great significance for shaping the culture of organizations. Servant leadership behaviors can foster the emergence of a peaceful, selfless, trusting, helping, and others-oriented environment that is low in interpersonal conflict. Servant leaders influence an organization's culture in a positive way as they embody behaviors that focus on meeting other's needs, which followers emulate and model for others in the workplace. Drawing from a social learning perspective, employees observe and learn from their manager's role-modeling of service and helping behaviors that emphasize the norms and expectations for behaviors and then act it out amongst each other (Bandura, 1977; Hunter et al., 2013; Liden et al., 2014; Schein, 2010). This has a replicating effect, as employee's role model these positive behaviors with others, which changes the entire organization by teaching others effective conflict management behaviors that help employees deescalate conflict on their own.

Servant leaders are the key to creating organizational cultures that can effectively manage conflict. Specifically, this study found that all four types of organizational conflict are reduced by behaving in compassionate, selfless, forgiving, and empowering ways – all of which makeup a servant leadership culture. Mahembe and Engelbrecht (2014) confirmed that a caring organizational environment that is high in trust and morale is created by servant leaders as they exemplify respect for employees and strive to develop them further. The establishment of a servant leadership culture not only helps reduce interpersonal workplace conflict, but changes the culture to one that is helpful, service-oriented, cohesive, and which provides an increased sense of empowerment, organizational commitment, and work engagement (Van Winkle et al., 2014). Ultimately, by inculcating a servant leadership culture, organizations are free to fulfill their vision without the costly human and financial consequences that result from unresolved conflict in the workplace.

### **Organization**

A final contribution from this study's findings goes beyond reducing conflict in the workplace and directly impacts an organization's finances. This study sought to address the problem of ineffective leadership behaviors that increases workplace conflict and results in increased human and financial costs, such as decreased organizational performance (Longe, 2015), increased absence and tardiness (Liu et al., 2015), and decreased motivation (de Wit et al., 2013), among others, that come as a result of an employee's job-related stress, burnout, and increased turnover intentions (Jimmieson et al., 2017). As leaders model servant leadership behaviors, employees benefit from an increased sense of unity and cohesion that comes as they

observe their leader's behaviors and reciprocate them out of gratitude. When leaders model servant leadership behaviors, organizations benefit from employees who are empowered, committed, and engaged (van Dierendonck et al., 2013; Van Winkle et al., 2014) freeing them to fulfil their vision and mission.

A committed, satisfied, and engaged workforce that can navigate through conflict effectively can give way to increased performance, creativity, and overall productivity among employees at all levels. By reducing the amount of time employees engage in interpersonal conflict through a servant leadership approach, organizations can focus on fulfilling their goals without the financial impact that can come from increased turnover, litigation expenses, and other financial costs that deplete organizations of valuable funds, time, and energy.

This study's findings have implications that may be uniquely suited to nonprofit organizations. Due to the more selfless and others-oriented culture in comparison to public and private organizations (Ghosh & Khatri, 2018; Liden et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2004), utilizing the servant leadership style may aid nonprofit organizations in achieving their mission due to the unique constraints of reduced employee compensation, limited resources, and focus on mission over profit. Because they are competing for the same leadership talent with public and private organizations (Allen et al., 2018), a culture of minimized conflict may attract talented leadership and maximize limited resources.

### **Limitations**

First, because participants were not able to provide insight into their feelings regarding why they felt the way they did when answering the survey questions, this study could not provide the meaning behind the resulting correlations. A second limitation is that the data gathered were the self-reported perceptions of employees via an online survey questionnaire regarding their managers and workplace, posing a limitation regarding verification or clarification of responses by the researcher. Finally, a third limitation is that the cross-sectional nature of this study resulted in a single point in time collection of the data. This made it unfeasible to measure servant leadership behaviors and levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace over a period of time, which would have included other contributing factors that could increase conflict in the workplace and provided increased generalizability of the findings.

### **Recommendations**

Leaders are catalysts in shaping, changing, and creating cultures who can influence an entire organization in positive or negative ways. Ineffective leader behaviors can significantly increase the level of conflict in the workplace, which diverts leaders from fulfilling the vision of the organization and leads to higher financial costs. For this reason, leaders are encouraged to role model servant leadership behaviors that enhance trust with their employees, creating safe and peaceful work environments that employees can thrive in. Once trust is established by modeling forgiveness and other servant leadership behaviors, leaders can inspire employees to join in the fulfillment of the vision through behaviors of stewardship, empowerment, and

accountability; while being humble, authentic, and giving praise for their followers' accomplishments.

*Building Trust.* The findings of this study highlight the importance of leaders to create environments of trust among their followers: it is the basis for the effectiveness of servant leadership in reducing interpersonal workplace conflict. To foster trusting relationships, leaders must first practice forgiveness, while being compassionate and empathetic with employees. This can be done by forgiving them for their errors and not criticizing their past mistakes. Instead, leaders should come alongside their employees with a helpful and servant attitude with the end goal of helping them learn, develop, and succeed. Practicing forgiveness, empathy, and compassion will create high quality relationships where employees are more willing listen to each other, take responsibility for their actions as well as openly discuss issues (Leon-Perez et al., 2016; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Uzun & Ayik, 2016).

*Inspiring Vision.* An environment of trust helps inspire followers to join in accomplishing the organization's mission. By modeling stewardship, servant leaders should emphasize the importance of focusing on how the organizational vision benefits the good of the whole. Additionally, highlighting the societal responsibility of the work creates an others-oriented culture in which members seek to serve and help others without pursuing self-interests. Managers can do this by helping employees see the link between their daily tasks and the mission while also empowering them by giving them needed information, resources, and by encouraging them to develop themselves further. Organizations can implement a day of service, where employees can work for a day in a different area that is directly linked to the services that the organization provides, which allows employees to see how their part helps the overall vision of the organization and its societal impact.

Finally, managers are encouraged to show confidence in their employees by holding them accountable for their work and how they carry it out. Accountability brings emphasis on the leadership portion of servant leadership theory, and it is an effective piece once a leader shares their authority with employees in an effort to provide them with new opportunities to grow, learn new skills, lead, and become servant leaders themselves (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Holding employees accountable can be done on a semi-annual basis through formal and informal evaluations and/or training and feedback sessions with the end goal of developing them and reevaluating their progress at the next meeting cycle.

*Behavioral Effectiveness.* Building trust, inspiring a vision, and encouraging accountability are done when leaders are transparent, humble, and give credit to others. Servant leaders can practice humility by learning from their mistakes, being open to critical feedback, and learning from the different views of others. Practically, this can be done by implementing 360-degree evaluations, where leaders can receive feedback from their subordinates, colleagues, and supervisors. Then, in a spirit of authenticity, servant leaders should be open about their limitations and weaknesses and express their feelings in a truthful and transparent way with a plan of action to improve on their shortcomings. This can be done in staff meetings that discuss everyone's areas of improvement while

adopting a “green/yellow/red” approach to evaluating themselves. In this approach, green are all the things the leader does well and should keep on doing, yellow are all the things that need changed, and red are all the ineffective things the leader does that they should stop doing. This meeting should be a safe place where behaviors can be addressed without fear of repercussion, but in a spirit of transparency and openness, genuinely seeking to learn and grow from each other.

Finally, servant leaders should keep themselves in the background, give credit where credit is due, and not seek their own recognition or awards, but recognize that their success is a result of their followers’ combined efforts. This can be accomplished by giving employees praise for their efforts privately and publicly on a regular basis. During one-on-one meetings, leaders should point out the specific things an employee has done to accomplish a goal or a task, as well as during informal conversations with their team, in all-employee meetings, and at annual recognition or staff appreciation events.

### **Future Research**

The recommendations for future research are derived from the unexpected findings of this study, as well as its limitations. First, correlational findings revealed that behaviors of authenticity did not significantly reduce relationship conflict. This was an unexpected finding given that prior research indicates that when leaders are open and transparent, it results in collaboration and increased performance because of the focus on mutual interests and work-related priorities that allows individuals to work through interpersonal conflict successfully (DeChurch et al., 2013; Jit et al., 2016; Thompson, 1991); therefore, future researchers may want to consider investigating the effects of authenticity on relationship conflict. Second, correlational findings revealed that behaviors of accountability did not significantly reduce task process conflict. This was also an unexpected finding given that prior research indicates that when leaders support their employees, hold them accountable, communicate clearly, and value them, the leaders foster the kind of collaboration that promotes and increases effectiveness within workgroups (Irving & Longbotham, 2007); therefore, future studies may want to consider investigating the effects of accountability on task process conflict.

Moreover, correlational findings revealed that courage had a nonsignificant correlation with the four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales. Given the definition of courage as defined by the SLS, the discrepancy in these findings may be due to the unclear focus or motivation regarding why the leader might take risks. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) measured courage by how much risk a manager took when trying new approaches and facing challenges regardless of opposition, which they do by strongly relying on personal values and convictions. Prior studies differentiated servant leadership from ethical and authentic leadership by emphasizing the selfless and others-oriented nature of servant leadership as opposed to the self-serving focus and motivation of the other theories (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Brown et al., 2005; Eva et al., 2019; Van Dierendonck, 2011). The courage subscale and survey questions may have lacked the selfless nature of servant leaders, making it confusing for individuals to link this behavior with servant leader attributes. Future researchers may want to consider redefining

courage to account for the selfless and others-oriented nature that drives servant leaders to take risks and differentiates it from other leadership theories.

Finally, the cross-sectional nature of this correlational study measured servant leadership behaviors and the levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace in a single point in time. This made it difficult to understand the meaning behind some of the results that might be more apparent through a different research design. For example, a qualitative study may shed light on the reasons why accountability was not significantly correlated with task process; a longitudinal study could also point to how a leader's authentic nature impacts relationship conflict over a long period of time. Therefore, future research might explore qualitative or longitudinal designs to understand the nature and meaning of the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

This study contributed to leadership theory and the existing body of knowledge by providing new insights for both leaders and organizations alike. Implications for leaders are centered on the finding that their behaviors create and shape an organization's culture, and through forgiving behaviors that promote trust, they can create a peaceful, collaborative, and cohesive work environment. When interpersonal conflict is reduced and trust in a leader increases, employees are free to focus on their work, helpful interpersonal behaviors increase, and employees are unified and personally identify with the organization. This translates to increased engagement, commitment, and performance, which reduces financial costs associated with litigation, counterproductive behaviors that hurt productivity, and turnover intentions, among others.

In light of the findings and implications of this study, several recommendations were proposed that can practically help leaders, nonprofit organizations, and future researchers. Recommendations for leaders and nonprofit organizations include creating an environment of trust through behaviors of forgiveness, inspiring a vision through behaviors of empowerment, stewardship, and accountability, and ensuring their behaviors are effective by modeling humility, authenticity, and standing back. Recommendations for future research include redefining courage to include the selfless nature of servant leadership, exploring the effects of accountability on task process, and investigating how authenticity impacts relationship conflict. Inculcating servant leadership behaviors in the workplace can have implications for the emergence of a peaceful, forgiving, and trusting organizational environment, wherein the workforce may become more unified, cooperative, and productive, promoting the successful fulfillment of an organization's mission.

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