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Publication Date

2014

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Servant Leadership: A Literature Review and Reflection

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Business Administration

in

Management

by

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June 2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Servant Leadership: A Literature Review and Reflection

by

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Master of Business Administration, Graduate Program in Management
University of California, Riverside, June 2014
Dr. Elaine Wong, Chairperson

Servant leadership drew more attentions from scholars and researchers recently. From my perspective, servant leaders have the capability of solving some real business world issues. Based on this impetus, I reviewed servant leadership models, and its relation with team effectiveness. This also accompanied with application based on the current business circumstances. I believe that servant leadership skills would be a powerful tool for executives. At the end, I pointed out research directions.

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Introduction

Many companies are usually in an uptrend in their first ten years or with their first generation of leaders. When new leaders succeed, some of these companies' performance often falls, or they lose their ability to compete with competitors. By exploring the reasons behind these failures, I simply classify them into two categories: the external factors, such as, the economic recession, the change of consumers' preferences, the emergence of a new technology and so on; and internal factors, for example, the management team left, financial issues, ineffective leadership, and so forth. The most important point from the above is internal factors, particularly leadership.

A leader's attributes determine a company's future. All the factors will work as a whole to impact a company's development because all companies are influenced by the internal and external environment. However, all these factors must effect an organization through its leader. In the real business world, a strategic decision made by the leader can take the company to a peak or cause the company to go into decline depending on the leader's vision. The decision making process is highly related to a person's attributes.

The current business and societal environment require modern leaders to keep a sense of urgency and take measures at the right time by updating a company's vision, emphasizing business ethics and corporate social responsibility, and taking care of their followers, even more than themselves to inspire employees to work harder and more creatively. However, business leaders' behaviors seem in conflict and unreachable to fulfill all these requirements mentioned above because businessman only care about

money and prefer short-term benefit. Thus, the times call for servant leadership. Actually, Greenleaf K. Robert articulated the concept of servant leadership in 1977. According to his ideas, servant leadership can be recognized when people begin with their natural feelings to serve first, then their conscious choices bring them to aspire to lead (Greenleaf R. K., 1991). A servant leader's highest priority is to make sure that other people's needs are being served (Greenleaf R. K., 1991).

Servant leaders have a critical influence on an organization's performance. They identify or create the unmet demand of the market and are willing to serve this market, which will help them win the first-mover advantage and dominant the market because their desires to serve will put their organization ahead of their competitors. The improvement of organizational performance is one outcome of the application of servant leadership. Servant leadership behaviors can truly impact an organization at its root. The well-known company, Starbucks, aimed to make sure that they can satisfy every customers' needs, so that its highest priority can be served through every cup of coffee. This is a good application of servant leadership to improve organizational performance. Besides organizational performance, servant leadership also increases team effectiveness by putting their followers' needs in a high priority. From the mission statement of Starbucks, we can know that employees are being called partners. It is not just a job for them. It is their passion and lives because their needs are also being served by Starbucks. They respect each other and work tightly to increase the team's effectiveness.

This review is divided into four sections. First is the interpretation and understanding of servant leader models and measurements that were developed by scholars. The second section is an exploration of the relations among servant leadership and team effectiveness. The third section points out applications of servant leadership to demonstrate its reality. The last provides a conclusion and research that could continue.

Servant Leadership Models

In this section, three servant leadership models will be briefly introduced. Then I use a chart to demonstrate my comprehension of the connections among attributes. Last is about the measurement of servant leadership.

Spears, the former director of Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, is the most influential researcher on servant leadership. Based on Greenleaf's writing, Spears distinguished ten attributes of servant leadership based on the Greenleaf's work: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 1995). These items are the key elements to the development of servant leadership.

Laub used the method of Delphi survey and expert panel to recognize 72 items, which can be separated into six clusters of servant leadership characteristics: values people, develops people, builds community, displays authenticity, provides leadership, shares leadership (Laub, 1999). Laub's model is mainly for the development of the Organizational Leadership Assessment. Compared with Spears' model, it provides more

detailed item under each cluster for people to easily understand and know what it is.

However, these detailed items are also constraints of further research.

Patterson's interpretation of servant leadership is from the perspective of virtue. These are agapao love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service (Patterson, 2003). "Agapao which carries with it a sense of doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason, or in other words, loving someone like a friend" (Winston , 2002). Patterson believes that love is the cornerstone of this model. This model narrowed down the characteristics of servant leadership in the comparison to the other two models mentioned above. However, this definition is more from the last stage of being a servant leader. It is not a complete experience or process of servant leadership.

Based on Spears' model and my understanding of other literature, I identified nine attributes and generated a chart to show the relationship among these attributes.

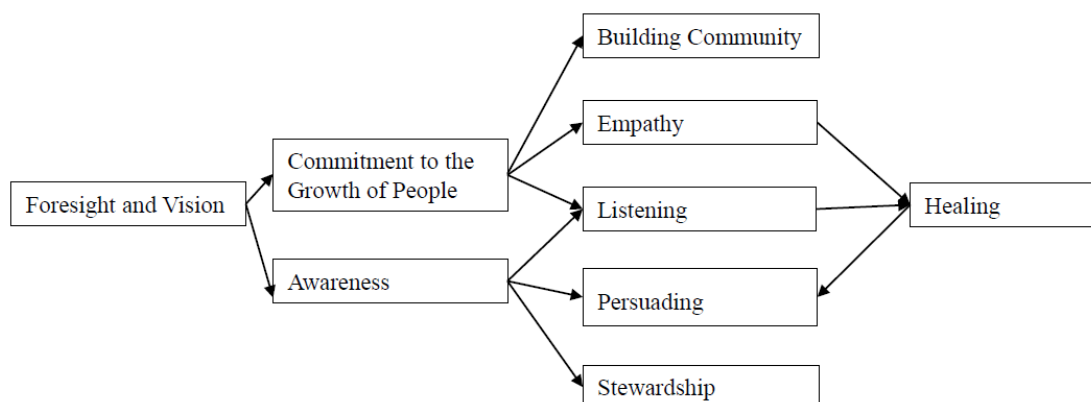


Figure 1: Connections Among Nine Servant Leadership Attributes

Foresight and Vision

From a leadership point of view, vision is regarded as a unique and big picture of the future. Servant leaders begin with being servants, but they should be equipped with the leadership potential quality, such as vision. First of all, the awareness of starting with serving is a great vision. A servant leader “needs to have a sense for the unknowable and be able to foresee the unforeseeable” (Greenleaf R. K., 1991). Foresight enables servant leaders to take deep lessons from historical events and have good predictions of future trends under the current and dynamic environment. This has been the ultimate challenge for leaders, which is a big difference between being a leader and a manager. We believe that servant leaders can do better than other types of leaders because they can abstract and identify the trend of development in many subtle aspects that ignored by other types of leaders, such as member relationships and tiny differences of changing corporate culture.

Steve Job is a good example of a leader with a great vision. He saw the trend of smart phones or electric devices and insisted on the direction. Eventually, this vision led Apple Inc. to stand in the peak. Only having a vision of future markets is not enough for servant leaders, they should have the vision of commitment to the growth of people.

Commitment to the Growth of People

To servant leaders, commitment to the growth of people refers to putting their followers’ development and benefits as a high priority. The tremendous responsibility for servant leaders is to do everything that they can do to mother the personal growth of their

followers. This is a big differentiation from other types of leadership. For example, servant leaders are dedicated to help their followers improve their followers' self-awareness and self-knowledge, develop their potential or strengths, and learn new skills, among other important aspects. The commitment to growth of their followers is also an expression of a servant leader's vision of future competition.

Such a vision also demonstrates that a servant leader definitely recognizes the significance of sustainable development because they know their working life is limited. However, the continuity of a strategy is also extremely important for an organization to grow. A leader's personality and abilities impact an organization's long-term development. Thus, servant leaders often groom an employee to take over their positions at an earlier time. The succession of CEOs was a big issue to many Chinese private companies several years ago. Many companies started to go down after the new leader succeeded. It is never too early to start developing a future leader of your company.

Awareness

Awareness refers to self-awareness and the understanding of interactions among behaviors in this discussion. A vision can craft leaders' awareness in a right direction.

A clear awareness of reality can positively contribute to a decision making process. It is always meaningful to know who we are, where do we come from, and where we are going. Servant leaders have a clear answer for these questions. Greenleaf observed that able leaders have their own inner serenity (Greenleaf R. K., 1991). This

inner serenity that can be interpreted as confidence that comes from servant leaders' visions and the ability to master the pace of an organization's development.

Servant leaders are also aware that one's talent is limited and won't be able to perfect the performance of an organization. This is an intelligence that is much more valuable than being smart. Thus, servant leaders are humble and can serve their followers to make full use of their followers' potentials. Humility is an important awareness because it refers to the attitude of putting one's own accomplishments and award in a proper perspective. Being humble can win more respects and authority, and inspire employees to work harder in Chinese culture. With more contributions from employees, the pie of an organization becomes bigger.

Building Community

Building community refers to the process and actions that can develop and thrive a regional area. Servant leaders make a great contribution to the development of the community by providing support to the community. Servant leaders started with serving people. This inspired them to make a huge commitment to their followers, and then evolved into a commitment to building community. Servant leaders express themselves in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002). Servant leaders also improve the ethical level of their organizations through the effectiveness of modeling. Their employees are encouraged and inspired by servant leaders to contribute to the enhancement of their community. An organization makes a contribution to its local community. As a return, the community helps that organization thrive by supporting it. Starbucks, which applied servant leadership behaviors, is a

contributor to an inclusive society and a healthy environment, so Starbucks has endured and thrived (Being a Responsible Company, 2014).

Empathy

Empathy, different from sympathy, is the ability to feel emotions that are being experienced by others. Starting with serving make servant leaders have very rich experiences. They are more sensible to the tiny emotions on their followers. The commitment to the growth people also forces servant leaders to develop an empathetic heart and skills. Spear argues that “the most successful servant leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners” (Spears L. C., 2010). People have different personalities and spirits that desire to be recognized. Servant leaders are willing to communicate with their followers’ opinions and truly understand their emotions because they have a strong desire to serve others and are willing to sacrifice their time to get into their followers’ life stories. Then, servant leaders can provide realistic help.

Listening

Listening has two aspects. One is related to the development of the organization, and the other is the stories of their followers. Listening has been regarded as an indispensable skill for successful leaders.

Without commitment to followers, leaders don’t really listen to their followers’ inner voices. Spears argued, “They need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others” (Spears, 2002). It provides a good insight in helping to develop people. The other reason that servant leaders can be good listener is their

awareness. They are humble leaders. “Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one’s own inner voice and seeking to understand what one’s body, spirit, and mind are communicating.” (Spear 2002) Listening is the first step of communication which is also crucial for being a servant leader. Through effective listening, servant leaders know what is being discussed and understood by employees (and what is not), how to identify appropriate channels to communicate the vision and mission of the organization to the followers, and how to lead the organization to the peak. Servant leaders are opening themselves to followers’ voice will help them to develop their followers’ lives and have a better insight into their organizations’ future.

Persuading

Persuasion is the capability of convincing others to accept a certain idea. If leader takes the risk of moving towards a direction and can successfully prove its feasibility, their proposals will be more persuasive regardless of their power from their titles. Servant leaders may not have a formal leadership position. Initially, the power of their authority is not given by the organization, it is earned by their ability to persuade people to follow their visions. Accomplishing tasks by taking risk to increase influence demonstrates a servant leader’s awareness. They know that the reality of their influence is limited in certain environments. In order to have an influence, servant leaders have to be very persuasive in proposing a new strategy in an organization by sharing their insight and wisdom. The ability of convincing the team comes from the great vision, their awareness and service.

Stewardship

Stewardship is the willingness to take responsibility for an organization and provide service to the employees instead of just giving orders and being a selfish manager. Peter Block has defined stewardship as “holding something in trust for another” (Block, *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest*, 2013). A steward is someone that can be fully trusted by another person. Trust is the base of relationships, particularly for leaders and followers. Servant leaders are trusted by their followers because their service indicates that they will take care of the followers’ needs. Servant leaders take followers’ benefits as the priority because the fundamental incentive for servant leaders is the desire to serve; it is their commitments to the growth of people. There is no reason to doubt them. In this way, trust could be fully built up from the ground. Also, a steward is seen as less powerful compared with the boss. Thus, the emphasis of persuasion is necessary from this perspective.

Healing

Healing is to help people get out of emotional hurt. Knowing the problems of employees, through empathic listening, is the prerequisite to healing them. The level of water in a bucket is determined by the shortest wooden board. The effectiveness of a team is also subject to the least talented or the problematic employee. Servant leaders are equipped with a healing ability to help people out. It also can increase the team effectiveness by fixing problems early. If they don’t, the problem of one employee will expand upwards, level by level, in a short time. Thus, healing the followers’ hurt can

prevent the matters from becoming worse. This, in turn, makes servant leaders more effective in persuading.

Overall, these nine factors work as a whole providing a powerful leadership tool. The validation of the connections need to be tested by further research. Regarding the measurement of servant leadership, several scale models have been developed.

Liden and his partners developed a multidimensional measure scale to study servant leadership. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis methods were used in their research to provide support of their model. In their survey, eighty five items were generated within the following dimensions: relationships, creating value for the community, empowering followers, helping subordinates grow and succeed, behaving ethically, conceptual skills, putting subordinates first, emotional healing, and servant hood (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008). Each dimension has a number of items ranging from eight to twelve.

The other influential survey is the Servant Leadership Survey. Dirk and Inge did several rounds of the survey and used exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis to differentiate the thirty items from seventy items with the highest reliability. These items were categorized in the following dimensions: empowerment, standing back, accountability, forgiveness, courage, authenticity, humility, and stewardship. (Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011)

These two measurement models covered the basic detailed items of being a servant leader. The study of correlation via regression between certain factors and

subjective outcomes or behaviors to recognize servant leadership attributes are based on the analysis of results of surveys. This type of practical research confirm connections among each factor, however, surveys may not take into account randomness of factors, or occasionality because of the limited sample quality and quantity. The further research of measurement model can also be developed by case studies.

Servant Leadership and Team Effectiveness

According to Hackman's research, team productivity, teamwork spirit and personal growth are three main factors that are used to measure team effectiveness. Team productivity can be regarded as a ratio of team goals' accomplishment and time used to achieve these goals. Teamwork spirit is mainly about the healthy relationship among team members and cohesion of a team. Personal growth refers to the improvement of personal ability. Servant leadership can increase team effectiveness through these criteria. Greenleaf stated that for the purpose of helping followers reach their own potential, CEO servant leadership provides clarity of focus and direction to followers, and empowers followers to make their own decisions, which will in turn be highly supported by followers who reciprocate servant behavior by working hard to ensure the leader's and organization's success (Greenleaf, Spears, & Vaill, 1998). Greenleaf's argument indicates that servant leadership has a positive association with personal and organizational success. This association can be connected to the three criteria provided by Hackman. The following chart shows the interactive relationship.

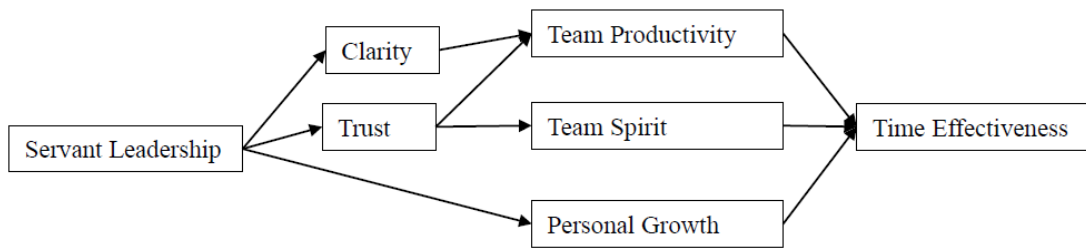


Figure 2: Servant Leadership and Team Effectiveness

The clarity of focus and direction works as a mediator between team productivity and servant leaders. A team can be defined as a group of people are working together toward a collective (Hackman, 2002). Servant leaders can provide a clear focus and direction because of their vision and their awareness of the reality. They emphasize clarity around problems, goals, and strategic direction, thereby giving employees a focus on the destination and the way to reach there (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008). Goal-setting theory suggests that clear goals can improve team performance because their roles in guiding and encouraging team members' attention and persistence (Locke & Latham, 1990). The clarity of team goals and individual members' roles in working toward meeting goals has a powerful impact on team effectiveness (Deborah, 1984). Thus, the clarity of goal and direction contributes to the productive outcome of teamwork.

Trust is a bridge between a strong team spirit and servant leaders. Communication issues have been an obstacle to team interactions and are involved in almost all conflicts within a team. Once misunderstanding, due to communication problems, has occurred, it will grow like a snowball. Unclear and “fake” information keeps team members hiding

their true ideas and feelings intentionally (or unintentionally) because they don't believe each other anymore. A trust crisis will ruin the whole team. Servant leaders gain team members' trust by listening to them and having a sense of empathy. The trust can pull a team tightly together, and lead the team toward its collective goal. In this way, a servant leader can elevate the capabilities of the team to be effective (Hu & Liden, 2011).

One significant attribute of servant leaders is the commitment to people. The degree of personal growth in a team can be an examination for servant leaders. They provide support to employees by assessing their followers' weaknesses and strengths. The great commitment from servant leaders to the growth of employees will win the respect from employees and give more incentives to employees to achieve team goals.

In addition, the complexity of the modern business environment is a barrier for team members to fully demonstrate their talents. However, servant leaders can provide guidance with a great vision to enhance the followers' confidence in the face of obstacles and uncertainty.

Practical Implication of Servant Leadership

We know that Greenleaf's idea of servant leadership came out after he read *Journey to the East*, by Hermann Hesse in 1958. However, a leader model in fiction can't be fully applied to real world situations. How we apply servant leadership in real business is a challenge.

In my opinion, servant leadership style is an ideal style. It is impossible to find a leader that is fully equipped with all the servant leadership attributes. However, we still

have leaders with portions of servant leadership attributes, and they and their teams are successful. Thus, servant leadership is not only an ideal combination of attributes, but also can be an indispensable organization culture.

Founder CEO's are likely to be oriented toward the behaviors associated with servant leadership, including being dedicated to the concerns and development of followers and being interested in the enhancement of the community (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008). At the first stage of any organization, leaders have to commit more time and effort in developing their business. Meanwhile, they also have to think about the community and their followers. If they don't contribute to the local community, they won't be able to build up their reputations and image. If an organization can't gain success in their locality, it will be become more difficult to be better in other areas. If you can't work well with something that you are familiar with, you can't work out something that you are not familiar with. Although the market has uncertainty and luck helps people succeed, we can't settle on luck to organize a team and run a business.

Nowadays, one crucial issue for the development of organizations is the lack of talent. It seems in contrast that many people have lost jobs and there is a big demand for qualified talent. To a new company, the development of followers is the key. Without good employees, a company won't be able to develop. If you can't satisfy the need for talent, they won't work for you because they can find a position with high salary in a big firm. Why should they work in a startup company if their needs are unmet? Thus, founders have more commitment to serve the community and followers. In addition, the desire is from themselves instead of being pushed. It is rarely easy to pay high salaries to

employees at the startup stage, thus, founding leaders have to make themselves more persuasive.

One example of a partial servant leader is the CEO of HTC, Peter Chou. Chou gave an interview with GOOD TV in 2011. In this interview, Chou gave background of his life and career, and stories at HTC, demonstrating that he has some attributes of a servant leader and servant leadership skills can increase the team effectiveness. (Chou, 2011)

Chou was born in a business family. He started to help his father in business when he was young, cultivating his own business ideas through this experience. However, he then dreamed to become an electrical engineer instead of a businessman because he thought the former would be an ideal title. Chou realized, however, that he would need a good education in electrical engineering, so he decided to study in Taiwan. Initially, he had to work in order to pay his fee, but he easily adjusted to life in Taiwan. He soon found a good job that paid relatively high, only several days after arriving in Taiwan.

When Chou studied at National Taiwan Ocean University, where he majored in electrical engineering, he had a clear vision, which was to be a great electrical engineer, at that time. Like other students, he had thought about and prepared for pursuing graduate studies in either the United States or elsewhere. But he gave up on that idea after realizing that he also could learn a lot in his career. The vision of being a great electrical engineer took him to study. However, the reality made him give up the idea to study

aboard. This is a demonstration of his potential leadership. His vision inspired him move forward and his awareness help him make a right decision.

A vision of future markets lead HTC's development. Chou has a clear vision and provides a clarity of direction that helps HTC grow. Based on the marketing environment, HTC didn't try to catch up with its competitors in the PC market because Chou realized that there was a huge gap between his company and his competitors. He worked hard to combine the functions of a PC with those of a cellphone, which would become what we now know as the smartphone, in order to differentiate HTC's products from its competitors. At that time, Chou thought the smart phone was the main market stream. If HTC didn't have its own brand of innovative products, it would be difficult to survive in such a fiercely competitive market. Although HTC earned huge profit from its OEM business, he decided to shift to build HTC's own consumer brand. His intentions were to help HTC build long term intangible assets, specifically a good brand reputation, in order to make HTC's run longer. If HTC continued doing ODM business, they would still make a profit and Chou didn't need to bear so much pressure. However, Chou saw the potential failures in the future. Chou stated that the riskiest thing was not to take risks. If you could manage the process appropriately, the risk wouldn't harm the company. The clarity of direction in HTC increased team productivity at that time. Without that vision and work on both directions, HTC will not have today's success.

Chou has a commit to the talents. First, his mentor served him by providing opportunities and being dedicated to his personal development. So, the commitment to develop followers was passed down to him. Also, he and his executives helped

employees mature and taught them how to be good, honest people. It is a good indicator that he has servant leader attributes. This kind of commitment is also demonstrated through Chou's care for his employees and long term relationships with them. In addition, He was aware of the importance of talent. To build a global brand, HTC needed international talent from around the world. Thus, they created a comfortable working environment and an international culture to attract and keep talented people.

Chou has a vision of future markets and is aware of his and HTC's reality. By providing a clarity of direction and a huge commitment to his followers, he built trust with his followers. The trust is a mediator that makes his team work together and desire to contribute to the success of the team. Then, it increases the team effectiveness.

Building community benefits HTC. The community does not only refer to a regional concept, but also refers to HTC's customers. HTC built good relationships with their customers because of the company's dedication and capability to satisfy its consumers' need. This shows that HTC is a serving organization. A servant leader is not only one person, it could be everyone in an organization. HTC's employees are willing to serve their customers, which in turn bring success to HTC.

Conclusion and Further Research

As an MBA student, the aim of this thesis was to have a basic idea of servant leader models and measurement scales, and to reflect on the current business environment. The desire to explore companies' failure and run a business with longevity

was my initial incentive to start leadership research. I was then caught by Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership and used it as the topic of my thesis.

In the review of the literature, I provided basic connections among nine attributes that can be used to recognize servant leaders. For example, Laub's model was created mainly by an expert panel, while Spears' model was based on his reading of Greenleaf's work. Actually, the attributes in my discussion are coming from Spears' model. The difference is found in the connections that are expressed in the figure. In the next section, I studied the positive association between servant leadership and team effectiveness, which can be regarded as an approach to applying servant leadership in the real world. In the section after that, I studied the similarities between founder status and servant leadership attributes, using Peter Chou as an example of a partial servant leader to see the applicability of my model.

Several servant leadership models and measurement scales have been developed by scholars. One critical limitation of servant leadership theory, however, is that its ideality does not account for conflicts of interests. Water can overflow when the vessel is full of water, and people will put their own benefits ahead of anyone else. There is also a serious shortage of servant leaders. Without realistic evidence in the business world, all models are not convincing.

The second critique is related to the validity of measurement scales. As researchers are limited to their influences, they are unable to achieve multiple levels of samples, for in terms of quality and quantity. However, different regions and cultures

have variable requirements for their leaders. There is no shortcut. Researchers need time to fully distribute the survey in order to have a diversified and large sample size.

Further researchers can think about the following directions:

1. With changing times, there are different requirements for servants and leaders.
Thus the items of the survey need to be changed as the times change. Keeping items in the servant leadership survey updated is an important aspect of the research. In other words, we should have a dynamic survey based on the demand of the different times. We should also develop more surveys to test the level of effectiveness of servant leadership's behavior in a team or on an organizational level. In addition, we should explore more about the validity of connections among each servant leadership attribute.
2. Some of the servant leadership attributes have direct outcomes while some do not. We can identify these two types of attributes. If they have a direct outcome, then we would know how to measure them. If not, what are their mediators and how do these attributes have an effect on outcome? Through validity tests, we would have some fresh conclusions. We could also explore the relationship among each factor, positive or negative, and in what degree they affect each other.
3. How do we measure the influence of servant leadership on a team level and an organizational level compared with other types of leadership, like ethical leadership and transformational leadership? We can explore the humanistic environment that shapes servant leaders in order to measure this influence.

This review provides a good start for people who have an interest on servant leadership. More research is expected to be done in this field. In addition we should see the need for servant leaders in the near future.

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