Servant Leadership Model:

The Role of Follower Self-Esteem, Emotional Intelligence, and Attributions on Organizational Effectiveness

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As part of the current research effort to provide clarity on the subject of servant leadership, Winston’s (2003) servant leadership model extended Patterson’s (2003) leader-to-follower model by including a follower-to-leader interaction to account for follower commitment to the servant leader for organizational tasks completion. It connects the leader’s directive action to follower commitment to organizational effectiveness by linking the leader’s service from Patterson’s model to followers’ agapao love. Thus, followership implies both leader and organizational commitment. The proposition is that the servant leader’s (follower-focused) service causes the followers to identify with and commit to the leader by changing their sense of love, and ends in organizational performance.

Winston’s model, however, contains gaps in the service-agapao link because it does not consider the interactive dynamics at that “entryway” that can reshape organizational commitment as defined by Winston. Drury’s (2004) empirical study exposes the implications of having a gap created by presumptive propositions in servant leadership research that overlook a construct that can be strategically positioned at that leader-to-follower entryway. Drury’s study found a statistically significant inverse relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment. This paper attempts to address this gap problem by providing a conceptual framework that uses an Esteem-Attribution Exchange Prism (EA), additional influence variables, and a stage-based service construct in examining servant leadership.

After three decades of nascence since its coinage by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1977, servant leadership (SL) is currently undergoing a renaissance. With a growing widespread adaptation by academic and business institutions, and a proliferation of research appearing in peer-reviewed journals, servant leadership is moving from an anecdotal phase to the validation phase where it is supported by quantitative empirical research. Page and Wong (2003) proffer two reasons for this surge of interest in servant leadership. They are: (a) SL is part of the larger movement away from command-and-control leadership toward the IT-based economy’s participatory and process-oriented leadership style, and (b) SL appears to hold the promise of being an antidote to the corrupt-ridden corporate scandals of recent memory. Senge (2002) concurs with the last reason by arguing, “In an era of massive institutional failure, the ideas of Servant Leadership point toward a possible path forward, and will continue to do so.”

I see the explosion as a paradigm shift brought about by a combination of the above-mentioned variables and leadership effectiveness research that has shown leadership models based on leader personality.
characteristics to be wanting. Higgs (2003), in a recent study of effective leadership, concluded that the past 50 years of research have steered us down the road of ineffective measures of leadership effectiveness. Instead of using short-term determinants such as market share growth, and financial improvement, he argues that real leadership success is determined largely through the building of a sustainable long-term asset—the building of follower capacity. This assessment of leadership effectiveness is the basis of the servant leadership theory.

After almost three decades of little research of servant leadership in a systematic manner (Laub, 1999; Russell & Stone, 2002), this research burst is a good development, and a necessity. Theoretical progress requires more than development—it requires adequate measurement. Sendjaya (2003) argues that rigorous qualitative and quantitative research studies on the constructs of servant leadership are not just particularly critical, but also the only logical step to draw the concepts into an intelligible whole. Current research in the servant leadership area, while still predominantly qualitative, is now including empirical studies. Current dissertation research includes those of Patterson (2003), Bryant (2003), Nelson (2003), and Smith (2003), among others. Other recent research contributions to servant leadership theory include Drury (2004); Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2003); Winston (2003); Sendjaya (2003); Sendjaya and Sarros (2002); Laub (2000); and Page and Wong (2000); among others.

What is Servant Leadership?

Robert Greenleaf’s first essay on servant leadership was published in 1970, and entitled “The Servant as Leader.” Other published essays followed this, but the concept did not gain a foothold in leadership literature until the publication in 1977 of the book, Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power. Greenleaf’s concept of servant leadership is based on a primary responsibility of service to followers by putting their interests above the leader’s interests (Yukl, 2002). In Greenleaf’s (1977) own words, the servant leader is a servant first:

A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one’s allegiance is that freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant nature of the leader . . . chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants.

Spears describes servant leadership as “serving first and encouraging good relationships by fostering an atmosphere of dignity and respect, of community-building and teamwork, and listening to colleagues and employees.” According to him, SL is a model of leadership that is based upon teamwork, community, and ethical and caring behavior (McCall, 2004). Spears’ ten identified characteristics of servant leaders are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, growth of people, and community building.

Page and Wong (2000) define servant leadership as serving others “by investing in their development and well being for the benefit of accomplishing tasks and goals for the common good.”

Another definition that derives from servant leadership literature describes servant leadership as “distancing oneself from using power, influence and position to serve self, and instead gravitating to a position where these instruments are used to empower, enable and encourage those that are within one’s circle of influence” (Rude, 2003).

The paradoxical nature of these definitions of a leader as both a leader and a servant goes against popular culture where leaders are viewed as heroes in comic books, novels, and movies. The acceptance of the concept as a viable theory in leadership circles has, therefore, been slow. Another reason appears to be the misguided notion of equating servant leadership with a leadership style that forfeits the instrument of power to followers (Page & Wong, 2003). A third reason is not only the lack of prior empirical research needed for validation and reference point creation, but also prior research studies that were undertaken in an ad hoc manner (Bass, 2000). The initial lack of this empirical research of SL construct was attributable to a need to maintain the sanctity of the concept through not “operationalizing the SL concept to the point of reductionism.
and trivialization” (Page & Wong, 2000). Now, theoretical advancement demands adequate measurement and replication tools.

**Leading with a Servant’s Heart**

To provide a conceptual framework for understanding servant leadership, Page and Wong (2000) developed a multidimensional model called “Expanding Circles of Servant Leaders.” It is comprised of expanding concentric circles, with a servant’s heart at the core. From this core, the development of servant leadership requires four orientations, which are represented by a sequential outward expansion of the circles. The four circles represent character, people, task, and process orientations. This paper is concerned with gaining a better understanding of the second orientation (people), which deals with the leader-follower relational interface. The paper primarily focuses on the interdependence of leader-follower relationship in a non-leader-centric way, with attention given to the importance of the follower perspective to gaining a better insight into development of SL model. Since much of the servant leadership literature is currently saturated with research on what SL is, it is important for the future development of the theory to understand the effect of the dynamics of the leader and the follower relational characteristics, and any other factors on leadership effectiveness. This paper will add to the Patterson (2003) research path of examining the “how” of SL instead of the “what,” by examining the factors that influence follower characteristics and assessing their impact on organizational performance.

**People-Orientation**

Leadership perceptions and studies have come a long way from when leadership effectiveness research focused entirely on leaders’ personality characteristics. New leadership models like SL now highlight the role and influence of group members’ characteristics on real leadership success. Current SL research highlights this influence, however, from focal point of the leader’s service to followers. Nothing is generally said about the follower-to-leader flip side, which would better explain follower response and commitment to a leader. With the servant-led followers being recipients of leadership characteristics and directed actions such as listening, empathy, empowerment, caring, and development, SL development cannot bear the continued understatement of follower-to-leader relational receptivity, contribution, and commitment to organizational outcomes.

**Leader-Follower Relationship**

According to Hollander (1995), one of the major components of the leader-follower relationship is not only the leader’s perception of himself or herself relative to his or her followers, but also how the followers perceive the leader. With followership as the essence of servant leadership, further research is clearly needed on the effect of a SL leader’s directed actions on follower perceptions and reactions. To underscore the importance of this phenomenon, a study of 400 promising managers on a fast track showed that the reason some did not reach their expected potential was due to a lack of relational skills instead of a deficit in technical skills (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). Hollander (1992) points out that followers accord or withdraw support to leaders. They also play an important role in defining and shaping the latitudes of a leader’s action through their perceptions (with expectations and attributions) about leader performance. Lord and Maher (1991) theorize that these perceptions are checked against prototypes held by followers and their related expectations of leader performance (i.e., “implicit leadership theories”). Followers, afterall,

> have the vision to see both the forest and the trees, the social capacity to work well with others, the strength of character to flourish without heroic status, the moral and psychological balance to pursue personal and corporate goals at no cost to either, and, above all, the desire to participate in a team effort for the accomplishment of some greater purpose. (Hughes, Ginnet, & Curphy, 1993)

Hollander also states that leadership and followership exist in a reciprocal, interdependent system as a unity . . . with the leader’s directive actions matched by an attentive strategic audience in the followers. With new SL research moving in the direction of not just construct validation but also a clarification of the leader-follower interdependency model (such as Patterson’s), SL development will gain from searchlighting follower commitment to leadership success.
Followership Role

The term followership is used in this essay to describe a positional role where the followers freely support the leader’s vision-driven directive actions in an active and effective way. The impact of followers on positive organizational outcomes results from the significance they accord the leader-to-follower relational element. Hinds (1989) wrote “People want to know how much you care before they care how much you know.” Parolini (2004) concurs by citing two empirical studies on firm performance, which show that a primary focus on people led to the best business/financial performance and organizational effectiveness (Hart & Quinn, 1993; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983). She also cites additional research that suggests effective leadership comes from valuing and prioritizing human resources (Brown & Dodd, 1998; Denison, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995; Polleys, 2002). Southwest Airlines, which practices servant leadership, has been recognized as one of the most admired airlines in the world year after year. It ranked #2 (2000) and #4 (2001) in Fortune magazine’s annual survey of top employers. Against the backdrop of the prevalence of servant leadership research and company performance data supporting the correlation of leader service and organizational commitment, I will now introduce Winston’s (2003) model. Figure 1 below shows Winston’s Extended Model. We can see the link between leader service and follower agapao love, which in turn increases both follower commitment to the leader and follower self-efficacy.

Figure 1 – Winston’s SL Model

The Esteem-Attribution Exchange Prism (EA)

Figure 2 introduces the bridge variable of EA. EA articulates the conditions of followership commitment and is the variable where a mixture of influence variables occurs to impact the key driver of follower self-esteem. The influence variables are not just leadership service, but also internal (or personal), as well as structural factors. All work together to determine a level of self-esteem that produces an attributive feeling, which can be defined as agapao love.

Leader service on its own might confer higher self-esteem but come out at the attribution end of EA with a sense of love that produces service below Kelley’s (1992) effective followers. For a jumpstart on effective follower commitment, leader service must be able to create three emotional responses that enhance self-
esteem after an exchange of needs in EA. Goffee and Jones (2002) mention these responses in their paper dealing with followers. They are feelings of significance, community, and excitement. However, before getting to the point of commitment to the leader, the path to be traveled within EA to achieve agapao love is emotional intelligence to self-esteem to attribution.

The role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) as a filter in managing attributions within EA is best understood when one looks at Winston and Hartsfield’s (2004) work in tying EI to servant leadership (SL). In their paper, Winston and Hartsfield used Mayer and Salovey’s (1997) four-factor concept of EI to show leader-follower relational outcomes. The four factors of EI are: (a) the ability to appraise and express emotion, (b) the use of emotion to enhance cognitive processes and decision making, (c) the ability to understand and analyze emotions, and (d) the reflective regulation of emotion. Winston and Hartsfield tie the EI factors to seven leader-follower relational behaviors that can be tied to servant leadership models, including their own. The seven outcomes are affect-based trust, empathy, altruism, commitment, caring/concerned behaviors, openness, and responsiveness. When tied to Winston and Hartsfield’s (2003) SL model, we see a relationship to the constructs of (a) commitment to the leader, (b) trust, (c) altruism, (d) service to the leader, (e) agapao, and (f) service. It also relates to the constructs of the leader-to-follower half of the model.

Internal influence variables go through the same process within EA as leader service. EI filtration produces attributions consistent with a sense of either personal satisfaction, appreciation, involvement, and empowerment or a lack of motivation, interest, and commitment to the leader and organization.

Structural influence variables deal with the environmental factors such as workplace atmospheres involving co-workers and team status. It also deals with issues such as reward, recognition, communication, work type, and work conditions, all of which can produce attributive levels that will lead to high follower output.

The interactive exchange dynamics of EA based on the total input influence variables is what determines the level of agapao love and corresponding levels of leader commitment, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, altruism, and service. These variables are explained in Winston and Hartsfield (2004) and will not be repeated in this paper. I will, however, expand on the service variable, which was modified in the model presented in this paper.

*Figure 2 – Esteem Attribution Prism*
Service
The discussion under this construct will center on follower service, which has been divided into stages reflecting a range of different performance levels. Kelly (1992) saw the need to view follower commitment or effectiveness in this manner by developing a two-dimensional model of follower behavior. The two dimensions comprise a horizontal axis defining follower behavior on a continuum ranging from passive to active, and a vertical axis describing follower abilities that range from dependent, uncritical thinking to independent, critical thinking. In between, it includes the ineffective follower behaviors of sheep, conformist, and alienated followers. Servant-led followers would be expected (according to current research literature) to be like Kelley’s effective followers because of a trust investiture in the leader who has proved to be a trusted servant. Kelley defined effective followers as those who:
- Manage themselves well;
- Are committed to the organization and to a purpose, principle, or person outside themselves;
- Build their competence and focus their efforts for maximum impact;
- Are courageous, honest, and credible.

In this paper, I adopted the 5 stages of dynamic followership performance presented in Blackshear’s (2003) Followership Continuum Model for the service variable. I find it appropriate because it is similarly based on the concept that the follower’s performance is variable, and caused by a number of variables. This essay posits that leader service, as well as internal and structural variables follow the steps outlined in Figure 2 to produce follower service output consistent with one of the five stages of this variable. It differs from Kelley’s because it does not lock one into a category of follower. Instead, the follower’s performance is ever changing, and the output level can be measured at any time along the continuum of service performance. The five stages are depicted in Figure 4, and range from the employee to exemplary stages. The three stages between the employee and exemplary ends are committed follower, engaged follower, and effective follower. Since the stages are on a continuum, it is important to note that each stage includes the prior stages, and movement along the continuum goes both ways.

Blackshear (2003) describes the five stages of follower performance in the following manner:
Stage 1 (Employee)—Providing work in return for some form of pay, by becoming an employee.
Stage 2 (Committed)—Employee is bound to the mission, idea, organization, or has an internal pledge to an effort or person.
Stage 3 (Engaged)—Follower is an active supporter, willing to go above and beyond the routine.
Stage 4 (Effective)—Follower is capable and dependable.
Stage 5 (Exemplary)—Follower sets ego aside and works to support the leader by leading. The exemplary follower could easily be the leader and the crucial difference to the organization.

**Figure 4 – Followership Continuum**

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<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>Stage 4</th>
<th>Stage 5</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Employee Follower</td>
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<td>Engaged Follower</td>
<td>Effective Follower</td>
<td>Exemplary Follower</td>
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**New SL Model**

A modified Servant Leadership model incorporating the concepts introduced in this essay is presented in Figure 5 below. This model shows how leader service combines with internal and structural variables in the steps outlined in Figure 2 to produce follower service output consistent with one of five stages.

Given the importance now attached to additional variables besides the servant leader’s role, further studies are warranted to explore and understand how the three variables interact within the EA Prism to produce follower performance levels that are hybrid, consistent, or inconsistent with organizational expectations within the servant organization. Crucial to this understanding is the interpretive role of emotional intelligence to the mix of input variables, and its conference of value to follower self-esteem.

This new model can be of value to both researchers and organizational leaders because it integrates the followership variables into a model that goes beyond current models, which make presumptive positive correlations between leader service and follower commitment. It opens up the door to future research into the link between leader role and follower commitment. Secondly, it provides a diagnostic and prescriptive approach that can be used to properly measure servant-led follower commitment. Thirdly, it also provides a basis for future research by way of instrument development and validation testing of the model’s variables in order to enhance the servant leadership research stream.
Figure 5. Modified Servant Leadership Model

Leader's Agapao

Humility ↔ Vision

Altruism ↔ Trust

Empowerment → Service

Internal Influence

Structural Influence

EA Prism

Leader Commitment

Intrinsic Motivation

Altruism For The Leader

Follower Agapao

Self-efficacy

Stage 1

Stage 2

Stage 3

Stage 4

Follower Service Continuum
References


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