The Power of a Hyphen: The Primacy of Servanthood in Servant-Leadership


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This paper addresses the significance of including the hyphen in the terms servant-leader and servant-leadership. The primacy of servanthood in servant-leadership is supported by the use of the hyphen when that and its related term, servant-leader, are written. We would do well to consider using the hyphen when writing these terms, as a way of affirming the primacy of servanthood in servant-leadership.

Use of the Hyphen in the Literature

A cursory examination of servant-leadership literature reveals that in most cases, no hyphen is used in the written term: we write about servant leaders and servant leadership. However, a few writers (Larry Spears, for example) insert the hyphen, thus, servant-leader and servant-leadership.

Is there significance in the use of the hyphen? In private correspondence, Larry Spears has confirmed to me that his use of the hyphen is intentional, for largely the reasons described in this paper. I will not presume to speak for anyone else, other than myself, regarding the intentionality of its presence or absence. Perhaps we haven’t yet given it thought. But I propose that the hyphen has significance, though we may not have yet considered the possibility.

Grammatical Significance of the Hyphen

There is a difference between servant leadership and servant-leadership. To make the difference clearer, let us first consider what is perhaps the more fundamental term: servant-leader. Thus, the difference can be framed as a contrast between the servant leader and the servant-leader.

Grammatically, the one phrase (servant leader) is formed by a noun (servant) functioning as an adjective which modifies another noun (leader). The other phrase is a compound noun formed by the joining of two coequal nouns—coequal in at least a grammatical sense.

What is the difference? What weight does a hyphen have? The hyphen, in this case, serves to contrast two approaches to servant-leadership. In one type (the servant leader), the starting point is leadership: servant leadership is one kind of leadership. This approach is consistent with the
grammatical form of the term: an adjective (functionally) servant modifying a noun leadership. In such grammatical constructions, primacy naturally falls to the noun.

In the other case (the servant-leader), there is a paradox formed by the joining of two sharply contrasting roles: servant and leader. The hyphen serves to eliminate the primacy of the second noun by removing the adjectival function of the first noun. Thus, the grammar of the unhyphenated construction supports the primacy of leadership, while in the hyphenated phrase, no such primacy emerges.

While the grammar of the hyphenated phrase does not give primacy to either noun, such a construction is more consistent with primacy resting with servant than the unhyphenated phrase. Describing one as servant-leader gives room for the proper primacy to be placed on servanthood, rather than leadership.

**The Primacy of Servanthood**

In servant-leadership studies, we return often to the formative statement of Robert Greenleaf: “The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.” If we take this statement seriously, we must acknowledge that servanthood, or service, comes first, and leadership follows.

This priority on servanthood in servant-leadership has profound significance. It sets servant-leadership apart from other forms of leadership. Other types of leadership are defined in the context of leadership. In contrast, servant-leadership is first an expression of servanthood, not simply a way of leading. Servant-leaders are servants first, then leaders.

If the primacy of servanthood in servant-leadership is not maintained, servant-leadership might be approached as simply a technique, a way of approaching leadership that in some cases might best fulfill organizational goals. This denies the very nature and heart of the servant-leader.

Of course, we cannot lean on grammar alone to support the primacy of servanthood in servant-leadership. We must affirm that primacy in other ways. Nonetheless, considering the use of the hyphen in the constructions servant-leader and servant-leadership provides an opportunity to affirm the primacy of servanthood in the very way we write the terms.

**Conclusion**

In a lineup of stellar papers representing careful and painstaking research and dealing with weighty issues related to servant-leadership, why wrangle over the significance of a hyphen? I suggest two reasons. First, considering the hyphen provides an opportunity for us to affirm the primacy of servanthood in servant-leadership. Secondly, it serves as a call to consider using the hyphen in our literature more consistently, as both a reminder of our own affirmation of the primacy of servanthood and a means of communicating that primacy, however subtly, in our writing.

Seeking to insert the hyphen may bring us into conflict with editors, at least in the case of servant-leadership. Experts in English grammar seem to be in agreement that the rules prohibit the use of the hyphen in the construction servant-leadership, while allowing it in servant-leader.
Whether the battle with editors is worth fighting seems best left to individual judgment in the specific situations in which they arise. But I would suggest that when it is possible, we affirm the primacy of servanthood in servant-leadership by using the hyphen in both terms, servant-leader and servant-leadership.