

# The Influence of Servant Leadership on Certified Knowledge Managers' Perception of Knowledge Management

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The purpose of this research is to explore how certified knowledge managers perceive that their servant leadership style has impacted their perception of and approach to knowledge management. The research design is qualitative using an exploratory method. Data was collected through interviews, observation and document review.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### Introduction to the Study

Few would deny that knowledge has become a critical resource of the 21st-century organization. In a rapidly changing business environment marked by globalization, hyper-competitiveness, restructuring, and downsizing, organizations are challenged to leverage the full knowledge and capabilities of their employees in order to create a sustainable competitive advantage. In an interconnected world where information is abundant and flowing continuously, management practices that determined success in the Industrial Age no longer apply (Skyrme, 2002). Instead of the stability evidenced in the Industrial Age, the Knowledge Age represents an economy where risk, uncertainty, and constant change are the norm rather than an exception (Tetenbaum, 1998; Williams, 2003).

Corporate assets such as plant and property have been replaced by intangible assets such as knowledge (Drucker, 1993; Skyrme, 2003). Knowledge has replaced money as the currency of exchange (Davenport & Prusak, 1998), making the management of this asset a critical task for the 21st-century leader. Authors writing about the knowledge orientation of organizations (Albert & Picq, 2004; Davenport, Prusak, & Wilson, 2003; DeLong & Fahey, 2000) stress that the key source of competitive advantage in the 21st century is gained by managing knowledge in order to be innovative and improve bottom-line results. These authors suggested that the essence of the 21st-century organization is the creation, organization, and management of knowledge assets. Coates stated,

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“Knowledge management is the most innovative, creative and important management concept to come along in the last 25 years” (2001, p. 9). Nonaka concurred, adding that in the 21st century, “the only certainty is uncertainty, and the one sure source of lasting competing advantage is knowledge” (1991, p. 96).

In 1959, Peter Drucker (1967) coined the term *knowledge worker* and argued that in the age to come, knowledge would be the central economic driver and differentiator of organizations. Evidence of organizations' shift to knowledge as the core resource of the 21st century is reflected in reports that 50% of the global gross domestic product is based on knowledge and knowledge-related assets (O'Dell, 2005). The global economic trend toward knowledge as an asset is also reflected in the U.S. workforce where conservative efforts suggest that at least one quarter of all workers are now considered knowledge workers, with the more aggressive figures stating that the number is closer to one half of all workers (Davenport, 2005). Four decades after Drucker's initial prediction of the importance of knowledge, it appears to be the core of the global economic transformation and the heart of business competitiveness.

Organizational culture is a powerful and defining quality within knowledge management. Culture serves as a social framework, defining appropriate organizational behavior and influencing how members relate to one another (Daft, 1995; Denison, 1990; Schein, 1985). Defining the social processes of knowledge management within an organization-culture influences the creation, sharing, and exploitation of knowledge (Ba, 2004; Lawson, 2003; Nonaka, 1991, 1994). Authors writing about the culture and knowledge management (DeLong & Fahey, 2000; Zheng, 2005) conclude that culture serves as the greatest barrier to effective knowledge management. Schein defined culture as a “set of basic tacit assumptions about how the world is and ought to be that a group of people share and that determines their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and, to some degree, their overt behavior” (1996, p. 11). Culture shapes assumptions about which knowledge is important (DeLong & Fahey; Schein, 1992), mediates relationships between individual and organizational knowledge (Chin-Loy, 2003; Mann, 2002), creates a context for social interaction (Schein), and shapes the creation and adoption of new knowledge (DeLong & Fahey; Nonaka, 1994).

Researchers writing about culture and knowledge management (Baker & Baker, 2001; DeLong & Fahey, 2000; Lawson, 2003; Ribiere & Sitar, 2003) suggest that leadership is needed to model behaviors and evolve the culture to motivate knowledge workers to voluntarily create, share, and leverage knowledge. Schein (1996) contended that the essence of leadership is to understand when it is necessary to evolve the culture to support business goals. For knowledge management efforts to succeed, leaders must develop and promote a knowledge-friendly culture built on personal relationships and trust designed to facilitate the creation, sharing, and exploitation of knowledge.

As a leadership philosophy which focuses on the follower to the exclusion of organization or self, Greenleaf's (1977) servant leadership is emerging as a leadership paradigm that aligns with the characteristics for creating and sustaining organizational knowledge within the 21st-century business environment. In describing servant leadership, Bass (2000) argued that the strength of servant

leadership was the focus upon the follower's learning, growth, and autonomy. Based upon these characteristics, Bass suggested that the theory of servant leadership would play a role in the leadership of the learning organization. Companies such as Herman Miller, Southwest Airlines, the Toro Company, and TD Industries are noted servant-led organizations. Laub noted, "Servant organizations are healthy . . . Southwest Airlines is the only airline to maintain a consistent profit while boldly caring for and maintaining all of its employees, even after the devastation of September 11" (2003, p. 1).

Authors writing about leadership in the 21st century (Blanchard & Hodges, 2002; Covey, 2002; Senge, 2002; Spears & Lawrence, 2002; Wheatley, 2004) have suggested that servant leadership is an appropriate leadership style for knowledge-based organizations. With servant leadership as a guiding principle, authors such as Blanchard and Hodges have viewed other leadership styles (e.g., Situational Leadership) as being servant leadership-based. As the "music you hear behind the words" (Senge, p. 240), servant leadership has been offered as "the foundation for effective leadership" in the 21st century (Blanchard & Hodges, p. ix). One of the primary elements is the relationship between the leader and the follower.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how certified knowledge managers perceive knowledge management and if these perceptions are influenced by servant leadership style. The knowledge management and leadership literature provide few to no studies exploring certified knowledge managers' perception of knowledge management and the influence of leadership style (and culture) on those perceptions. This study was, then, an initial exploration to determine "what is." In the absence of empirical research in the area, no hypotheses are offered.

#### Research Questions

1. What are certified knowledge managers' perceptions of knowledge management?
2. In what ways does leadership style affect these perceptions?
3. How do servant-led certified knowledge managers' perceptions of knowledge management and the influence of their leadership style on these perceptions affect their adoption and use of knowledge management practices?

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Knowledge Management

With knowledge established as the critical competitive resource (Drucker, 2001; Stewart, 1997) of the 21st-century organization, organizations naturally have sought to manage the knowledge and capabilities of the entire workforce for competitive advantage (Garvin, 1993; Goh, 2002; Senge, 1990). The manner in which knowledge is managed can cause the success or failure of an enterprise (Amar, 2002; O'Dell & Grayson, 1998). In an effort to capture, exploit, and disseminate employees' knowledge, most organizations have instituted enterprise-wide knowledge management initiatives (Harris, 2005; Saint-Onge, 1999; Williams, 2003).

In theory, knowledge management research is still in its infancy with related literature being primarily focused on the importance of knowledge, the rise of the knowledge worker, and the emergence of knowledge-based organizations. In practice, Gartner Group (Harris, 2005) reported that 95% of the Fortune 500 organizations have initiated enterprise-wide knowledge-based projects. While organizations have recognized that employee knowledge represents a highly valued, intangible, and strategic asset (Foote et al., 2001), the successful management of this knowledge has also become one of its greatest challenges (Davenport, 2001; Hinds & Pfeffer, 2003; Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2001).

#### *Knowledge Management Evolution*

To date, an accepted definition of knowledge which is applicable and accepted by every researcher, discipline, and organization does not exist (Beckman, 1999; Yukl, 2002). The definition of knowledge management varies greatly depending upon the lens being used for the evaluation. There is a variety of disciplines that have influenced the field of knowledge management, including philosophy (in defining knowledge), cognitive science (in understanding knowledge workers), social science (understanding motivation, people, interactions, culture, environment), management science (optimizing operations and integrating them within the enterprise), information science (building knowledge-related capabilities), knowledge engineering (eliciting and codifying knowledge), artificial intelligence (automating routine and knowledge-intensive work), and economics (determining priorities; Prusak, 2001; Wiig, 1995).

Even with increased focus from practitioners and researchers alike, the concept of knowledge and its management are not clearly understood or clearly and consistently defined. Following the definition of knowledge offered by Davenport and Prusak (1998), this study defines knowledge management as a set of dynamic social processes and activities related to making the best use of the knowledge available to the organization. These management processes and activities are grounded in the social view of knowledge and involve human interaction, with its inherent complexity of values, assumptions, language, and symbols (Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000). As a social phenomenon, knowledge management authors (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Malhotra, 2000; O'Dell, 2005; Senge, 1999) suggest to effectively manage knowledge the organization should focus on the creation, sharing, and exploitation of knowledge. Nonaka and Konno (1998) suggested that the underlying

foundation of these three areas stems from the type of knowledge under consideration—explicit or tacit. The management of, and the differences and interaction between, these two types of knowledge are at the heart of various knowledge management approaches and related leadership roles.

#### Classification of Knowledge

##### *Explicit Knowledge: The First Generation of Knowledge Management*

The concept of knowledge management was conceived of the Industrial Age and following the suggestions of Fredrick Taylor, was geared towards capturing, codifying, and sharing knowledge. This approach to knowledge management is referred to as the “first generation” and focuses on what McElroy referred to as “supply-side knowledge management” (1999, p. xxiv).

First-generation knowledge management is dominated by a focus on tangible assets and the management of what many would refer to as information. Remaining true to Taylor’s scientific method of the Industrial Age, this concept of knowledge management considers knowledge as a substance to be produced, measured, catalogued, and optimized (Wheatley, 2000). Referring to knowledge as a “thing” to be captured, shared, and represented as a process, the goal for organizational leaders in this generation of knowledge management is to, as David Skyrme offered, “decant the human capital into the structural capital of an organization” (as cited in Wheatley, 2000, p. 4).

These technology-based solutions to managing knowledge promised to help capture and share employee knowledge with the right person at the right time (O’Dell, 2005). While a common set of tools or “infrastructure” is needed to support the collaboration needs of the knowledge worker (Harris, 2005), the existence of collaborative tools and technology does not guarantee that knowledge management initiatives will succeed. Whereas explicit knowledge is easily codified, captured, and shared, tacit knowledge is not. Since tacit knowledge cannot be codified and can only be observed through its application and acquired through practice, its transfer between people is slow, costly, and uncertain (Kogut & Zander, 1992).

##### *Tacit Knowledge: The Second Generation of Knowledge Management*

In contrast to explicit knowledge which is tangible, codified, and “public,” tacit knowledge is “personal, context-specific, and therefore hard to formalize and communicate” (Crowley, 2000, p. 212). Tacit knowledge is “private,” personal in origin, context specific and can be difficult to fully articulate and transmit (Davenport et al., 2003). Examples of tacit knowledge include intuition and subjective insights that are valuable to and based upon the experience of the possessor. Unlike first-generation knowledge management that focused on the explicit form of knowledge, the second generation of knowledge management includes people and social initiatives (McElroy, 2003). Instead of focusing on the supply-side, second-generation knowledge management introduces a focus on the “demand-side” which seeks to enhance the capacity to produce knowledge and offer innovations. While second-generation knowledge management includes some supply-side concepts of knowledge management, it is more holistic and cyclical, offering a focus on knowledge creation and sharing. McElroy offered, “the arrival of second-generation knowledge management includes the introduction

of new terms, new concepts, and new insights, which together give second-generation knowledge management some real depth and distinction when compared to first-generation models” (p. 4).

Considering these two types of knowledge, knowledge management effectively addresses the details of how to create, capture, share, store, and exploit both explicit and tacit knowledge (Charney, 2003). While innovation and learning organizations are associated with the sharing of tacit knowledge, knowledge management must be considered holistically, thus leveraging both explicit and tacit knowledge to achieve organizational goals and stimulate innovation (Hamel, 2000; Schulz, 2001; Stewart, 1997).

#### Knowledge Creation and Sharing

Nonaka and Konno (1998) suggested that since knowledge exists in either explicit or tacit form, the creation of knowledge actually occurs in the sharing and ultimately the conversion between the two. Lee defined knowledge sharing as “activities of transferring or disseminating knowledge from one person, group, or organization to another” (2000, p. 324). As knowledge moves from the public domain and is internalized by the individual, organizational norms and personal values and experience shape the knowledge into potentially new forms—knowledge creation. Acting as a spiraling process, the combination of the two categories of knowledge offer four conversion patterns for consideration and form the basis for Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) Socialization, Externalization, Internalization, and Combination (SECI) model (see Figure 1).

##### *The SECI Model—Socialization*

As a type of knowledge which is personal in nature and difficult to transmit, tacit to tacit knowledge sharing and conversion is often the most valuable to the organization (Nonaka & Konno, 1998). Within the SECI model, socialization is the area which addresses the sharing of tacit knowledge. Nonaka and Konno noted that the term “socialization” is used to emphasize that tacit knowledge is exchanged only through joint activities and interaction between individuals. Nonaka and Konno posited that knowledge sharing between individuals can only occur when the two share a level of trust and a common context through which the knowledge can be understood.

##### *The SECI Model—Externalization*

The value of converting tacit knowledge to an explicit form has long been recognized within organizations (Halal & Taylor, 1999; Skyrme & Amidon, 1997). The externalization process focuses on the translation process whereby an individual converts personal information into a form which can be shared with others. This process focus represents the efforts of many organizations in the first generation of knowledge management. The act of sharing involves converting personal beliefs and experience into figurative language (metaphors, analogies, narratives) and visuals which are understood by the larger group. A shared context aids in the process, providing guidance for the formation and use of the appropriate language.

##### *The SECI Model—Combination*

Once knowledge has been converted into a form which is easily understood and shared, the focus of knowledge management involves communication and diffusion of this knowledge. Nonaka

and Konno (1998) offered that the combination phase involves converting and combining explicit knowledge into more complex explicit knowledge, through the subprocesses of integrating, dissemination, and editing explicit knowledge.

#### *The SECI Model—Internalization*

The next phase in the spiral—internalization—addresses the conversion of explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge. This phase requires that an individual discern what knowledge is relevant for one's self, and through the application of experience and values make it personal. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) offered that when personal mental models are used as a framework for evaluating public knowledge, as in the Internalization phase, the resulting personalization creates new views of knowledge—or innovation.

#### Knowledge Exploitation

Boisot (1998) described knowledge exploitation as the process of converting knowledge into products and services which are valued by consumers and generate revenue for the organization. Wang and Plaskoff (2002) offered a broader view of knowledge exploitation in describing what is needed for effective knowledge management. Researchers such as Bryant (2003) offer that while knowledge creation and sharing operate at the individual and group levels, knowledge utilization instead occurs at the organizational level.

Nonaka and Konno (1998) referred to this shared space as “Ba” and suggest that this context for relationships is required within successful knowledge management initiatives (1998, p. 40). Ba represents the shared context, trust, and relationship needed to exchange and create knowledge. For the individual, Ba is created within the team. For the team, Ba is created within the organization and for the organization; Ba is created within the market. The concept of Ba is consistent with the knowledge literature (Choo & Bontis, 2002; Davenport & Prusak, 1998;) which concludes that context of culture is one of the key factors which determine the success or failure of knowledge management initiatives. As noted by Berman-Brown and Woodland (1999), knowledge sharing, creation, and exploitation are symbols of trust and unity within an organization. These processes require a culture which emphasizes trust, involvement, openness, and creativity.

#### Culture

As organizations have shifted from the first generation of knowledge management with a focus on explicit knowledge to a holistic approach which recognizes the value of tacit knowledge, culture has become a key focus area for knowledge management. Knowledge management literature (Bock, 1999; Davenport, 2001; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; DeLong & Fahey, 2000; Knapp & Yu, 1999) suggests that culture includes numerous factors that mediate the effectiveness of knowledge management efforts. DeLong and Fahey suggested that related to the creation, sharing, and exploitation of knowledge, culture influences behaviors in four specific manners: in shaping what knowledge is and how it should be valued; defining the relationship between individual and organizational knowledge—in particular, who controls it; creates the context required for social

interaction; and finally, culture shapes the method in which new knowledge is created and accepted within the organization.

An organization's culture reflects the accepted values, norms, and practices of its employees (Schein, 1996; see Figure 2). Consequently, an organization's culture governs the flow of knowledge independent of whether or not there is a formalized knowledge management initiative (DeTienne et al., 2004).

Schein defined culture as "a set of basic tacit assumptions about how the world is and ought to be that a group of people share and that determines their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and, to some degree, their overt behavior" (1996, p. 11). Schein (2004) offered a three-level model to further categorize and understand culture: Artifacts, Espoused Values, and Basic Underlying Assumptions (see Figure 3).

#### *Artifacts or Practices*

VBM (de Jonge, 2005) defined the top layer of Schein's model—Artifacts—as aspects within an organization which can be easily discerned but may not be fully understood. DeLong and Fahey referred to this level as practices, and suggested that at this level are the "most visible symbols and manifestations of a culture" (2000, p. 115). Schein referred to artifacts as "all the phenomena that one sees, hears, and feels when one encounters a new group" (2004, p. 25).

#### *Espoused Values or Norms*

DeLong and Fahey (2000) explained that espoused values or norms are generally shaped from the underlying assumptions or values of the organization, but are more easily discernable than the bottom layer. Since norms are more observable than the underlying values which help derive them, they are easier to change, and act as a second lever for knowledge management. VBM (de Jonge, 2005) defined this layer of culture as being concerned with the goals, philosophies, and conscious strategies of the organization. Schein defined this middle layer as "the articulated, publicly announced principles and values that the group claims to be trying to achieve" (2004, p. 13).

#### *Basic Underlying Assumptions or Values*

The deepest level of culture, as categorized by Schein's three-level model, is Basic Underlying Assumptions. This level represents the core essence of culture and represents embedded, tacit preferences about what the organization is seeking to achieve and the manner in which it should be accomplished (de Jonge, 2005; DeLong & Fahey, 2000). These tacit preferences are difficult to discern since they exist largely at an unconscious level, and are equally difficult to change. It is at this level the true culture of an organization can be revealed (Schein, 2004), and it is at this level that true change can be enacted within the organization (DeLong & Fahey; Schein).

#### *Culture Shapes Assumptions About Knowledge*

Authors writing about culture within organizations (DeLong & Fahey, 2000; Schein, 1996, 2004) indicate that organizations have usually an overall culture as well as various subcultures. The amount of conflict between these subcultures will vary from organization to organization as will the amount of influence that is exerted by the overall organizational culture.

### *Culture Defines the Relationship Between Individual and Organization Knowledge*

Davenport and Prusak (1998) introduced the concept of a market for knowledge exchange with values being placed upon what information is shared. This concept implies both the concept of personal ownership of knowledge as well as power associated with knowledge. As highlighted by Senge (1999) and DeLong and Fahey (2000), culture can dictate not only what value is assigned to the knowledge being exchanged but also whether it is better to have individual knowledge (i.e., power to be exchanged in the market) or share all knowledge within the organization such that individual power is not valued (see Figure 4).

### *Culture Creates the Context Required for Social Interaction*

One manner in which culture shapes perceptions and behaviors is by establishing the organizational context for social interaction. Through the established rules (e.g., “Don’t question authority.” “Never interrupt the boss.”) and norms related to meeting (formats, frequency, appropriate use of blogs, e-mail, and voice-mail), the environment in which people communicate is established. The established social context governs interactions between individuals, and in doing so impacts the manner in which knowledge is created, shared, and exploited.

The concept of vertical interactions refers to the manner in which an organization discusses sensitive topics, and the approachability of senior management. Lawson’s (2003) research about the cultural components needed to effectively support knowledge management initiatives concluded that elements of trust, flexibility, and collaboration are required as a basic foundation. The impact of low trust within an environment has already been addressed within the literature review. Although a complete list of required cultural characteristics for effective knowledge management does not exist, in addition to horizontal and vertical interaction, DeLong and Fahey (2000) highlighted behaviors of sharing and teaching as key elements (see Figure 5).

### *Culture Shapes the Method in Which New Knowledge is Created and Exploited*

Schein (2004) suggested that through established norms and practices a group will reject behavior based on any other premise. The core of knowledge management is not only to seek to manage existing explicit knowledge but, through the interaction of both tacit and explicit knowledge, through people new knowledge and innovation result. If an organization’s culture does not support receiving knowledge from external sources, then knowledge management initiatives will have limited long-term competitive value for the organization (Davenport, 2001; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; DeLong & Fahey, 2000; Drucker, 1999).

## Servant Leadership

The philosophy of leading by serving has been explained by countless leadership theorists to include building an environment that not only serves the needs of the organization but also provides a culture of trust and commitment for its workers to grow and develop as human beings. The servant leader’s highest value is the people, and organizational results are secondary outcomes (Patterson, 2003). As argued by Farling, Stone, and Winston, “Serving is not the means by which to get results, but the behavior of serving is the result” (1999, p. 3). Authors writing about leadership, culture, and

knowledge management (Bryant, 2003; Hislop, 2003; Pirc, 2001; Ribiere & Sitar, 2003) posit that leadership in the Knowledge Age is focused on the individual while modeling the needed knowledge-supporting behavior.

These authors explained that the level of commitment and trust established within the environment directly relates to how employees create, share, and leverage knowledge. Covey argued it will only be those organizations whose people not only willingly volunteer their tremendous creative talent, commitment, and loyalty, but whose organizations align their structures, systems, and management style to support the empowerment of their people that will survive and thrive as market leaders. (2002, p. 2)

### Servant Leadership Characteristics

As the founder of the servant leadership philosophy, Greenleaf suggested that a central issue in society is to rebuild employee trust—"in their bosses . . . in their corporations . . . in each other" (1977, p. 24). Greenleaf concluded that business leaders and organizations had a societal responsibility that went beyond generating profits. Greenleaf offered, "Business exists as much to provide meaningful work to the person as it exists to provide a product or service to the customer" (p. 142). The essence of successful knowledge management leadership is to leverage the existing culture while introducing appropriate change in order to raise the volume and quality of knowledge exchange.

As Greenleaf stated, "Servant leadership is transformative because it reorders the manner in which people view themselves in relation to the world" (p. 10). With servant leadership as a guiding principle, authors such as Blanchard and Hodges (2002) have viewed other leadership styles (e.g., Situational Leadership) as being servant leadership-based. As the "music you hear behind the words" (Senge, p. 240), servant leadership has been offered as "the foundation for effective leadership" in the 21st century (Blanchard & Hodges, p. ix). Serving as a philosophical approach or moral compass (Senge, 2002), servant leadership, then, can help define "who" a leader is at the core and act as the first step to enable further exploration of self and team.

Who is a servant leader? Greenleaf (2002) stated that the servant leader is one who is servant first. Greenleaf wrote

It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead . . . The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived? (p. 27)

### *Displays Authenticity and Builds Community*

LaCabana (2003) argued that in recent human history, the essence of community has been lost as small locales are subsumed by large institutions. Understanding this loss, the servant leader seeks to restore and build community while valuing individuality and diversity within the local team as well as other institutions and the community (LaCabana; Laub, 2003).

*Values and Develops People*

Recognizing that employees are the lifeblood of Knowledge Age organizations, Watkins and Marsick (1993, 1999) challenged Knowledge Age leaders to create continuous learning opportunities for followers. Watkins and Marsick's challenge struck at the core of two key servant leadership behaviors—valuing and developing people (Laub, 1999). With the focus on others rather than self, the servant leader “becomes adept at empowering others through coaching, mentoring, delegating, supporting, cheerleading, listening, and learning from all team members” (Miller & Katz, 2002, p. 50).

*Shares and Provides Leadership*

The shifting of roles back and forth between leader and follower (i.e., stewardship) is a key theme in the Knowledge Age (Davenport, 2001; Senge, 2002). This notion is consistent with servant leadership philosophy which places an emphasis on serving only when called (Greenleaf, 2002). Blanchard offered that servant leaders “aren't possessive about their position. They view it as an act of stewardship rather than ownership” (2000, p. 1).

Senge contends that one of the important tasks of leaders in learning organizations is to be the steward (servant) of the vision within the organization. Being a steward means clarifying and nurturing a vision that is greater than one's self. The idea behind service is contributing to the greater good of others. (Northouse, 2003, p. 312)

Companies such as Herman Miller, Southwest Airlines, the Toro Company, and TD Industries are noted servant-led organizations. Laub noted, “Servant organizations are healthy . . . Southwest Airlines is the only airline to maintain a consistent profit while boldly caring for and maintaining all of its employees, even after the devastation of September 11” (2003, p. 1).

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design and an exploratory method.

#### *Qualitative Research*

Although quantitative research methods are widely used within leadership studies, Conger (1998) argued that they are poor at capturing the dimension of context as well as measuring interaction and perceptions. Authors (Bryman, 2004; Conger, 1998) writing about research designs suggest that qualitative research should be used for exploration of newer areas of leadership research. As Biggart and Hamilton argued

Leadership is a relationship among persons embedded in a social setting at a given historical moment. Strategies of leadership must consider the normative basis of the relationship and the setting, and the distinctive performance abilities of the actors involved. Theorists, no less than would-be leaders, must take these factors in to account. (1987, p. 439)

A qualitative research approach in the natural setting of the participants allows the researcher rich interaction and the opportunity to validate findings through the observation of environment.

#### *Exploratory Method*

In situations where little empirical research exists, explorative techniques can determine if future research is warranted and generate hypotheses for empirical research (Robson, 2002).

According to Patton

The purpose of exploratory data collection is to understand enough about what is happening, and what outcomes may be important to identify key variables. Exploratory research relies on naturalistic inquiry, the collection of qualitative data, and inductive analysis. Studying real-world situations as they unfold naturally, non-manipulative, unobtrusive, and non-controlling. There is openness to whatever emerges and no constraints on the outcomes. (1990, p. 37)

Utilizing the qualitative techniques as outlined by Cooper and Schindler, this study sought to determine “what is” and understand how certified knowledge managers perceived knowledge management and to what extent the servant leadership style shaped these perceptions.

#### Validity and Reliability

Merriam (1998) suggested that validity and reliability are critical within qualitative research for the findings to influence current theory and practice. Within qualitative research, validity refers to the accurateness of the findings as viewed from the viewpoint of the researcher or the participant (Creswell, 2003). The primary threat to the validity of qualitative research “lies in the inaccuracy or incompleteness of data” (Robson, 2002, p. 171). Robson (2002) and Creswell (2003) suggested that to address concerns of validity and reliability, qualitative researchers should exercise care in the

collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data collected to protect the intent of those under examination. Several strategies were used within this study to ensure the accurateness and thoroughness, including triangulation of data sources, the use of audio devices to record interviews, member checks, and audit trail field notes.

Creswell (2003) and Yin (1994) suggested utilizing one or more research strategies, or “triangulation,” to ensure the accuracy and objectivity of the findings. Yin (1994) identified six sources of evidence to provide a complete array for research triangulation: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as an alternative set of criteria for judging the validity and reliability of qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that in lieu of validity, the researcher should address the criteria of credibility and transferability. Credibility relates to the traditional criteria of internal validity and is concerned with establishing whether or not the results are believable as viewed by the participants in the research. This criterion was addressed in this study through member checks. Lincoln and Guba’s use of the term “transferability” corresponds to traditional measures of external validity. As an investigation of servant-led certified knowledge managers’ perceptions of knowledge management, this study represented a specific context which does not easily lend itself to transferability to other contexts and settings. However, a holistic description of perceptions offered by the participants will allow readers to determine if the situation can be extrapolated to their own specific context (Merriam, 1998).

In lieu of the traditional concept of reliability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered the concepts of dependability and confirmability. Dependability refers to the consistency of the inquiry processes used given the changing context of the investigation. Lincoln and Guba’s final concept of confirmability speaks to quality of the findings and whether it is supported by the data collected. The intent is to reduce the amount of researcher influence which could present itself in the data collection and subsequent analysis. In this study, dependability and confirmability were addressed by following a consistent interview protocol and assured through the audit trail associated with the process. A combination of the standard research approach, an audit trail captured in field notes, and member checks enhanced the dependability and confirmability of the data collection and analysis.

#### Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 10 certified knowledge managers who self-selected as exhibiting the servant leadership style. The Knowledge Management Institute (KMI) and KM Pro are an educational institution and trade association providing courses to earn the Knowledge Management certification. For those individuals who complete the required educational and testing standards, a professional designation of Certified Knowledge Manager is granted. This designation attests to the professional’s ability in a wide variety of knowledge management activities to deliver results for the organization outside the classroom.

Given the theoretical and practical experience related to knowledge management, certified knowledge managers served as the target sample for investigation. From this sampling framework, a representative and accessible sample of 10 certified knowledge managers who self-identified as exhibiting the servant leadership style were chosen for further study. As an exploratory study that sought understanding, a sample size of 10 participants is a reasonable starting point. These participants were self-identified into the study using Wong and Page's (2003) Revised Servant Leadership Profile.

#### *Instrumentation*

Wong and Page's (2003) Revised Servant Leadership Profile (RSLP) is an instrument that identifies the presence of servant leadership characteristics. The RSLP represents a revision to Page and Wong's (2000) original servant leadership profile (SLP). The original survey was administered to 1,157 participants and identified 12 interpretable factors. The revised instrument randomizes the items within the survey "so that the resulting factors would not be biased by the *a priori* classification as was the case for SLP" (Wong & Page, 2003, p. 9). The RSLP comprises 10 subscales—8 which represent the presence of servant leadership characteristics, and 2 which represent characteristics antithetic to servant leadership. Within the instrument, the eight servant leadership characteristics measured are: Developing and Empowering Others, Power and Pride, Visionary Leadership, Servanthood, Responsible Leadership, Honesty, Authenticity, and Courageous Leadership. Wong and Page (2003) suggested that identified factors provide a simple yet clear portrait of servant leadership. The two antithetic characteristics are Egotistic Pride and Authoritarian Hierarchy, as the servant leadership literature suggests that servant leadership cannot coexist with these two characteristics (Wong & Page, 2003). Adminstrating the survey online, certified knowledge managers were asked to answer each statement according to their personal alignment with the given statement via a 7-point Likert rating scale. The scale ranges from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 4, *undecided*, and ends with 7, *strongly agree*.

#### *Survey Administration*

Distribution of the survey instrument to the certified knowledge manager population was done electronically by KMI and KM Pro. These organizations maintain a strong alumni community that interacts through e-mail and an online community of practice. The link to the online survey and a letter of introduction was sent out in the first e-mail. The letter explained the purpose of the study and solicited participation via a Web site hosting the survey. The RSLP was accessible via a Web site which provided information related to consent and instructions for participation. Two weeks after the initial release of the e-mail, follow-up e-mails were sent requesting participation. Once results of the RSLP were compiled, 10 certified knowledge managers who exhibited servant leadership characteristics were contacted for further study participation. The scoring process ranked the participants along a continuum of exhibiting servant leadership characteristics. Following the purposive sampling strategy, participants selected for interviewing were those scoring within the top quartile of the continuum.

### Data Collection Procedures

The data collection techniques for this study included interviews, direct observation, and document review. This triangulation of data sources, as suggested by Robson (2002) provided a means to ensure the validity and reliability of the emerging patterns and theories.

#### *Interviews*

The primary method of data collection within this study was face-to-face interviews.. Yin noted that face-to-face interviews allow focus to center on information “which includes contextual and casual inferential data” (p. 34).

A semi-structured interviewing style was used for the face-to-face meetings. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to respond freely, and the overall order and content of the discussion were influenced by the interviewees (Robson, 2002).

#### *Observations*

The protocol of observation for this study prompted the researcher to capture the description of the setting, characteristics of the people who participated, description of the interview content, along with the quality of the interaction between researcher and interviewee.

#### *Document Review*

Documents provided a comprehensive and historical viewpoint while minimizing associated researcher bias. Documents reviewed during the site visits included knowledge management program details and activity, related Web sites, and other documents made available by participants. Information regarding the source, content, context, and style was captured about each document reviewed.

### Data Analysis

Using the constant comparison technique to conduct analysis, the data from all three collection methods were organized into major themes and categories. The constant comparison technique “combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981, p. 58). In qualitative research, the data must be sifted and compared in order to reveal key themes and directions. In this research study, open, axial, and selected coding were used in the data analysis process.

## CHAPTER 4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

### Research Question 1

What are certified knowledge manager's perceptions of knowledge management?

#### *Findings*

All or 100% of participant's spoke of knowledge management in terms of relationships comprised of three subvariables: trust, connection, and context. In general, certified knowledge managers perceived that knowledge management is social in nature, and is built upon relationships. Certified knowledge managers perceived the explicit approach to knowledge management as being unsustainable over time. Instead, knowledge management was perceived by certified knowledge managers as being dynamic and continually created as knowledge workers interacted. Knowledge management being perceived as a predominately social construct was evident in the descriptive language the participants used to describe knowledge management. Knowledge manager G stated: "Our organization continues to have new processes, new techniques, new machinery, everything. If you share this knowledge with others, they get to enhance it and give it back as something better than what you had."

Instead of regarding knowledge as an object to be captured and managed, certified knowledge managers instead regarded it as something dynamic in nature, created through the interactions of knowledge workers. Participants perceived that relationships need to be cultivated with knowledge managers facilitating the open interactions needed for knowledge management. While the role of codified or explicit knowledge was acknowledged, certified knowledge managers perceived that the key to knowledge management existed within tacit knowledge.

#### *Trust*

The first subfinding which emerged from the data was the concept of trust. Within trust, the themes of trust between individuals and a culture of trust emerged as subsets. Eight, or 80%, of the participants referenced trust as being a key element within knowledge management. Certified knowledge manager I stated, "Building shared confidence and trust is the key to the kingdom."

As a foundational concept, discussion of trust among these eight participants centered upon on two areas: interpersonal trust and culture of trust.

#### *Interpersonal Trust*

All eight participants discussing trust perceived that trust needed to exist between individuals as well within the culture. On a person-to-person or interpersonal level, participants suggested that trust is required for knowledge to be freely shared between two individuals. This perception is consistent with knowledge management literature. Certified knowledge manager B explained, "In my experience, if we don't trust each other, if we don't have a relationship of some type, we are not able to truly exchange knowledge."

On a person-to-person level, it can be gleaned from the data that trust provides the needed foundation for open dialogue and communication. Certified knowledge manager C proclaimed, “You have got to be able to trust the person you are dealing with, and you have to be able to trust the knowledge that you’re getting.”

#### *Culture of Trust*

In addition to the concept of personal trust serving as a key element in the development of a relationship, certified knowledge managers also perceived that a culture of trust within an organization is required. As certified knowledge manager A noted: “If a culture of trust does not exist, then knowledge management doesn’t work. If you don’t deal with those kinds of basic fundamental personal issues . . . you’ll never get the solid foundation that you need.”

The eight participants spoke of the trust needed within the organization and suggested it was the role of the leader (knowledge manager) to create the needed culture. Certified knowledge manager A noted that this was not an easy task:

You can’t force or make a culture of trust happen. It has to be real or it won’t be there at all. I think that you have to look at leadership style (of the knowledge manager), and the goals (of the organization). You have to concentrate on all of those things so that you can at least try to change some of the behavior (of knowledge workers) so that you can actually get some results.

#### *Connection*

Certified knowledge manager B simply stated “Knowledge management is connecting people to people.” When speaking of the importance of having a connection between individuals, certified knowledge manager A suggested that connections help with “the removal of insecurity and environmental threats, whether actual or perceived.”

Six, or 75%, of the eight participants who discussed the concept of connection suggested that person-to-person connections are the foundation for forming a network. Certified knowledge manager A suggested that in initial questions, most people reached out to their immediate network. Five, or 62.5%, of the eight participants suggested that within this networked community certain individuals act as social hubs. These social hubs may not have direct expertise to share or to respond to an inquiry—but they perform an essential function by passing along inquiries and making introductions between participants to develop new connections.

#### *Context*

Eight, or 80%, of participants suggested that a key component of knowledge management was the concept of context. Schein (2004) suggests that context allows individuals to interpret words and events in accordance to the local culture. In a low context culture, the group explicitly defines events and words and has no reliance upon the culture to provide interpretation. However, in a high context culture, Schein suggests that many things are left unsaid and the meanings of words and events vary based upon the subgroup. Viewed from this perspective, the culture provides the context needed for interpretation. All eight, or 100%, of the eight informants speaking about context

suggested that it is the person sharing who has the responsibility to ensure that proper context is provided. The eight participants also suggested that the person sharing the knowledge should try to provide as much context as possible and work to share knowledge in the manner specified by the receiver.

#### Research Question 2

In what ways does leadership style affect these perceptions?

#### *Findings*

All 10, or 100%, of participants spoke of both their leadership style and knowledge management in the terms of being a mindset. A person's leadership style from this viewpoint is not an extra activity, but rather a way of behaving that reflects an individual's values. Similarly participants perceived that knowledge management is also not an extra activity; it is simply a way of behaving which reflects an individual's values. Knowledge manager A explained

Your leadership style is how you operate. It's how you interact and what you expect and how you conduct yourself, and how to approach different things, not only decision making, but interaction with people and how you go about getting things done; everything from the details on the day-to-day basis, as well as the big picture. Your leadership style is going to affect how you approach all of those aspects.

Just as a person's leadership style was identified as a reflection of the individual, participants' held similar perceptions about a person's approach to knowledge management. All 10, or 100%, of participants perceived that a person's approach to knowledge was linked to their core values. Certified knowledge manager A stated

I think that as an individual, whatever your leadership style is probably going to be how you "do knowledge management." Your leadership style is how you approach life and how you conduct business. I think who you are definitely impacts how you approach knowledge management.

All 10, or 100%, of participants described knowledge management and leadership style in terms of "who you are." Certified knowledge manager E highlighted that knowledge management was a core aspect of a person's behavior in offering

Before I started this job, I didn't know knowledge management existed, but I have always been the kind of person that wants to share with people. I want to get input from people. I want to learn from them, so I have always been managing knowledge. When I started working here, I saw that my leadership style could help spread knowledge. Knowledge management is very difficult for people to define—even when reading the professional journals you see different aspects of knowledge management. In the end, you have to internalize it.

Participants suggested that a person's leadership style and their approach to knowledge management initiatives are directly linked. Certified knowledge manager E spoke to the relationship between leadership style and knowledge management through facilitating participation and sharing:

Leadership style to me is the way a person uses their background and experience to lead others. My style is very participative—with knowledge management it has to be participative because you are trying to get everyone to share. A knowledge leader needs to be a good listener and easy to converse with to get everyone involved.

It can be inferred from this statements that a person's leadership style impacts their perception and approach to knowledge management since both are a reflection of a person's core values.

### Research Question 3

How do certified knowledge manager's perception of knowledge management and the influence of their servant leadership style on these perceptions affect their adoption and use of knowledge management?

Data about how certified knowledge manager's perception of knowledge management and the influence of their servant leadership style on these perceptions affect their adoption and use of knowledge management was limited. Extensive data was gathered about the current use of knowledge management, but little evidence surfaced whether participants' perceptions and leadership style influenced whether or not they used knowledge management practices.

Themes which did emerge from the limited data available of whether leadership style and perception of knowledge management influenced the adoption and use of knowledge management practices centered on the knowledge management being a natural state, the desire to share knowledge while helping others make decisions and grow as individuals.

#### *Way of Being*

Certified knowledge managers' believed that adoption and use of knowledge management was simply an extension of their natural inclination to help others and to share knowledge. Participant E offered

Before I started this job, I didn't know knowledge management existed, but I have always been the kind of person that wants to share with people. I want to get input from people. I want to learn from them, so I have always been managing knowledge.

Moving from this foundational concept of knowledge management as a way of being, this participant also suggested that all knowledge is social in nature and no action is available without interaction and sharing between knowledge workers. This participant offered

Well, I think it first of all has to be rooted...we go back to the "Be" part of knowledge management. I think people have to understand that sharing is the right thing to do. It is in principle what leads to human beings being able to achieve their personal visions and to do it in such a way that there are

positive social outcomes. After all, there is no such thing as actual knowledge in an individual's brain. Nothing is going to happen unless you share it. You, yourself, will not be able to achieve your aims or to have an impact on the world unless you bring your expertise on the behalf of others.

### *Sharing of Knowledge*

Another key theme that emerged from the limited data available was the sharing of knowledge. Knowledge management is sometimes viewed as a trading market where knowledge is used as a currency and representation of power. Certified knowledge manager's adoption and use of knowledge management did not reflect this viewpoint. Instead, certified knowledge managers based their adoption and use of knowledge management on the concept that it could be used to share knowledge or power and to develop others and the organization. Focused on the social aspect of knowledge management, participants' adoption and use of knowledge management practices was driven primarily by the desire to share knowledge and contribute to the development and growth of others.

### *Participant's Behavior Relative to Knowledge Management*

Certified knowledge managers' behavior relative to the subfindings, exhibit the characteristics offered by Laub (1999) for servant leadership: Values and Develops Others, Displays Authenticity and Builds Community, and Provides and Shares Leadership. These characteristics of servant leadership provide a framework to address the research question, "In what ways would servant leadership affect certified knowledge manager's adoption and use of knowledge management?"

*Values and develops others.* Certified knowledge managers' behavior with respect to trust, connection and context all align with the leadership characteristic of valuing and developing others. Certified knowledge managers demonstrated trust in the manner that they valued and developed others and in the way they served as mentors and openly shared knowledge.

Five, or 50%, of the participants suggested that mentoring could serve as a meaning for support knowledge management. Certified knowledge manager A served as a mentor and suggested that it provided a means to build "rapport and trust with individuals." Certified knowledge managers also valued and developed people by freely offering knowledge to others. Instead of treating knowledge as a currency to be traded for power within the organization, certified knowledge managers espoused and exhibit behaviors which advocated freely sharing what they knew to all. By freely sharing knowledge, the knowledge manager is modeling the desired behavior within the team, and also providing opportunities for learning and growth.

*Displays authenticity and builds community.* Participant's behavior with respect to trust aligns with the servant leadership characteristics of displaying authenticity and building community. These characteristics were observed in the behavior of certified knowledge managers through meeting observation and daily interaction with coworkers. From the data collection, certified knowledge managers displayed authenticity and built community in the manner that they shared knowledge and sought to build human networks.

*Provides and shares leadership.* Participants' behavior with respect to trust, connection and context aligns with the characteristics of providing and sharing leadership. The researcher observed certified knowledge managers exhibiting these characteristics through the hosting of online communities, facilitating group interaction, and openly sharing knowledge. All participants suggested that no one person could know everything, and that it was important to ensure all opinions and focus on allowing the correct person to lead. Participant C offered

I have learned that to share responsibility is a measure of your leadership style and your maturity. Your leadership style contributes to whether or not you have people following you. A leader that shares information and shares power is a more valued leadership skill.

Certified knowledge manager H believed that establishing connections was a main activity of providing leadership in stating, "leadership is mainly about building rapport and trust with individuals." Certified knowledge manager F suggested that "knowledge is something that is learned through experience and must then be shared."

## CHAPTER 5. SUMMARY

Certified knowledge managers' perceptions relative to knowledge management suggested that knowledge management was social in nature and based upon relationships. Certified knowledge managers perceive just like a person's leadership style, knowledge management is a mindset, a way of being.

As concepts which emerged from the interview data, the idea of knowledge management being grounded in relationships and the need for trust, connection and context support Nonaka and Konno's (1998) concept of Ba. Knowledge is framed against the culture of the organization as well as the values and beliefs of the individuals. Ba represents the connection between participants and also provides context needed for interpretation and trust required for openness.

Findings relating to the three research questions suggested that certified knowledge manager's perceptions of knowledge management and the influence of servant leadership affected their adoption and use of knowledge management. Data regarding perceptions of leadership style suggested that an individual's leadership style was a reflection of a person's core values framed by the context of the situation. Certified knowledge managers in this study used the servant leadership style as a reflection of their values to share knowledge, build relationships and develop others. The research methodology produced data suggesting certified knowledge managers' perceptions, adoption and use of knowledge management were influenced by their servant leadership style. Participants' behaviors were consistent with material presented in the literature review concerning servant leadership. The research suggests that the majority of the study participants focused knowledge management and leadership practices on relationships to provide the trust, connection and context needed for long-term success.

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## FIGURE CAPTIONS

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## The SECI model (Nonaka and Takeuchi)









