



LEADERSHIP REFLECTION:
**A MODEL FOR EFFECTIVE SERVANT LEADERSHIP PRACTICE:
A BIBLICALLY-CONSISTENT AND RESEARCH-BASED APPROACH
TO LEADERSHIP**

JUSTIN A. IRVING

As interest in leadership studies continues to grow, servant leadership is uniquely positioned to address the leadership challenges of our day. Not only is servant leadership a Biblically-consistent approach to leadership practice, it is also demonstrably effective. This reflection engages both Biblical perspectives on servant leadership—drawing from Matthew 20, Mark 10, and John 13—and goes on to presents a model for effective servant leadership practice based on regression analyses. The model highlights nine core servant leadership practices that focus around three conceptual clusters.

Servant leadership continues to draw attention from researchers and practitioners alike in our time. Arguing that the “servant-leader *is* servant first,” Greenleaf set the stage for this contemporary inquiry into an understanding of leadership that begins with a “natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*.”¹ This commitment to serving the needs of followers and the surrounding community is the heart of servant leadership practice. Rather than a leadership model simply focused on the needs of leaders, this servant-first ethic that Greenleaf pointed toward is increasingly becoming the focus of leadership scholars.² In this brief leadership reflection, some of the Biblical roots of servant leadership are discussed and special focus is given to unpacking nine servant leadership practices in light of these Biblical roots.

¹ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 27.

² For example, Dirk van Dierendonck and Kathleen Patterson, *Servant Leadership: Developments in Theory and Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

I: SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Although Greenleaf brought the servant leadership discussion into contemporary focus, a similar call to servant-oriented behaviors can be traced back to Biblical roots in general and New Testament roots in particular. Several Biblical perspectives quickly come to mind. First, in both Matthew 20 and Mark 10, we find the account of Jesus declaring to His disciples that the Son of Man would be condemned to death by the chief priests and scribes, and then delivered over to be flogged and crucified by the Gentiles.³ Immediately following this account in Matthew's Gospel, we find a mother bringing a request to Jesus that her sons, James and John, be allowed to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in His coming kingdom. From the parallel account in Mark's Gospel, we know that this mother's request represented the request of her sons as well.

In these accounts, we see that the stark contrast between the focus of Jesus and the focus of His disciples is intended by Matthew and Mark. While Jesus was focused on the self-sacrificial act awaiting Him in Jerusalem, the disciples were more concerned about their status and position in the coming kingdom. This presented a teachable moment for the disciples, and Jesus pressed in with penetrating insight. After addressing the cup of suffering in which the disciples would share,⁴ Jesus contrasted the humble way of the slave and servant to the harsh and domineering rule of the Gentile authorities. In noting that the Son of Man had not come to be served but to serve, Jesus challenged His disciples to look to His model over and above the dictatorial rule of societal leaders.⁵

A second Biblical perspective is found in John 13:1-20, a passage that highlights Jesus' famous act of washing His disciples' feet. In this account, we find the narrative divided into three broad sections: (1) Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet,⁶ (2) Jesus' interaction with Peter,⁷ and (3) Jesus' exhortation for the disciples to follow His example.⁸ Although there are subnarratives included in this passage—for example, the narrative threads referring to Judas Iscariot—this three-fold division provides a basic overview of the central themes presented in the passage.

In the first section, verses 1-5, the act of Jesus' beginning to wash His disciples' feet is described in detail. John writes, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him."⁹ In an act of heavenly humility, Jesus provided a powerful example for His followers. While this description of Jesus' taking up the basin and the towel sounds very familiar and comfortable for most contemporary Christians, it is important to remember that this was shocking to the first-century followers of Jesus. Peter's strong reaction in verse eight of the passage is perhaps the best contextual evidence of this reality. In this second section of the John 13 narrative, we read of Peter's strong reaction when Jesus came to wash his feet—

³ Mt 20:17-19; Mk 10:32-34.

⁴ Mt 20:22-23; Mk 10:38-40.

⁵ Mt 20:24-28; Mk 10:41-45.

⁶ Jn 13:1-5.

⁷ Jn 13:6-11.

⁸ Jn 13:12-20.

⁹ Jn 13:3-5.

“You shall never wash my feet.”¹⁰ After this refusal of Peter, Jesus reminds Peter that His washing Peter is a prerequisite for his sharing in the life of Jesus. This important dialogical interlude in the heart of Jesus’ act of washing the disciples’ feet reminds Peter that having his needs met by Jesus—needs for being cleansed—is the foundation for our serving others and meeting their needs. Based on this interaction, we may conclude that for Biblical servant leaders a commitment to serving others begins with a commitment to being served first by Jesus.

In the final section of this passage, John 13:12-20, Jesus takes what He has done for His disciples and uses His act of service as an opportunity to exhort His disciples to similar behaviors. In the heart of this teachable moment, Jesus declares, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.”¹¹ In this moment, Jesus brought together His embodied example and His didactic exhortation. In so doing, the disciples were left with a clear picture of what was expected and all who read John’s narrative are left with a powerful example of how to communicate with a congruence of words and actions.

Although there are many passages we could turn to in the Bible, the examples and instructions of Jesus in Matthew 20, Mark 10, and John 13 provide key Biblical perspectives on servant-oriented practices, all of which may serve as a foundation for our understanding and practice of servant leadership. It is in light of these Biblical principles that we turn our attention to a set of servant leadership practices that have been found to be associated with team effectiveness.

II: A MODEL FOR EFFECTIVE SERVANT LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

One of the benefits of social science research methods is their capacity to confirm the utility or effectiveness of constructs that are inherently valid philosophically or Biblically. For instance, we do not need social science research methods to inform us that humility is important for individuals and leaders; philosophically and Biblically, the validity and importance of humility may be argued apart from social science. However, social science can come alongside philosophical and Biblical arguments to confirm the utility or effectiveness of a construct like humility. This is what was found in Collins’ work surrounding level five leaders.¹² Not only is leader humility ethically good and Biblically consistent as a construct—an argument that may be made Biblically and philosophically—Collins added through social science methods that leader humility is also effective.

A similar argument may be made for understanding servant leadership in this light. The importance and validity of servant-oriented practices for leaders can be argued ethically, morally, philosophically, and Biblically apart from questions of its utility and effectiveness. However, it is powerful when leadership practices that are ethically good and Biblically consistent are also found to be effective. While servant leadership is a Biblically consistent model of leadership practice—and this alone is enough for leaders to utilize servant leadership practices—it is also helpful to know that servant leadership is demonstrably

¹⁰ Jn 13:8.

¹¹ Jn 13:14-15.

¹² Jim Collins, “Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve,” *Harvard Business Review* (January 2001): 67-76.

effective.

In the remainder of this leadership reflection, I will unpack nine servant leadership practices that were found to be associated with effective teams. These nine practices, which cluster around three primary themes, are based on the analyses of Irving and Longbotham.¹³ In short, Irving and Longbotham¹⁴ identified a ten-item regression model of effective servant leadership practices. Since two of these ten items were conceptually similar, nine practices are presented in this reflection. More detailed treatments of the regression analyses are found in the Irving and Longbotham articles. In this reflection, the focus is on providing some discussion and description around these servant leadership practices in light of the Biblical roots identified above. With this in mind, the following figure is provided as a means of presenting the key practices in light of the three macro clusters.

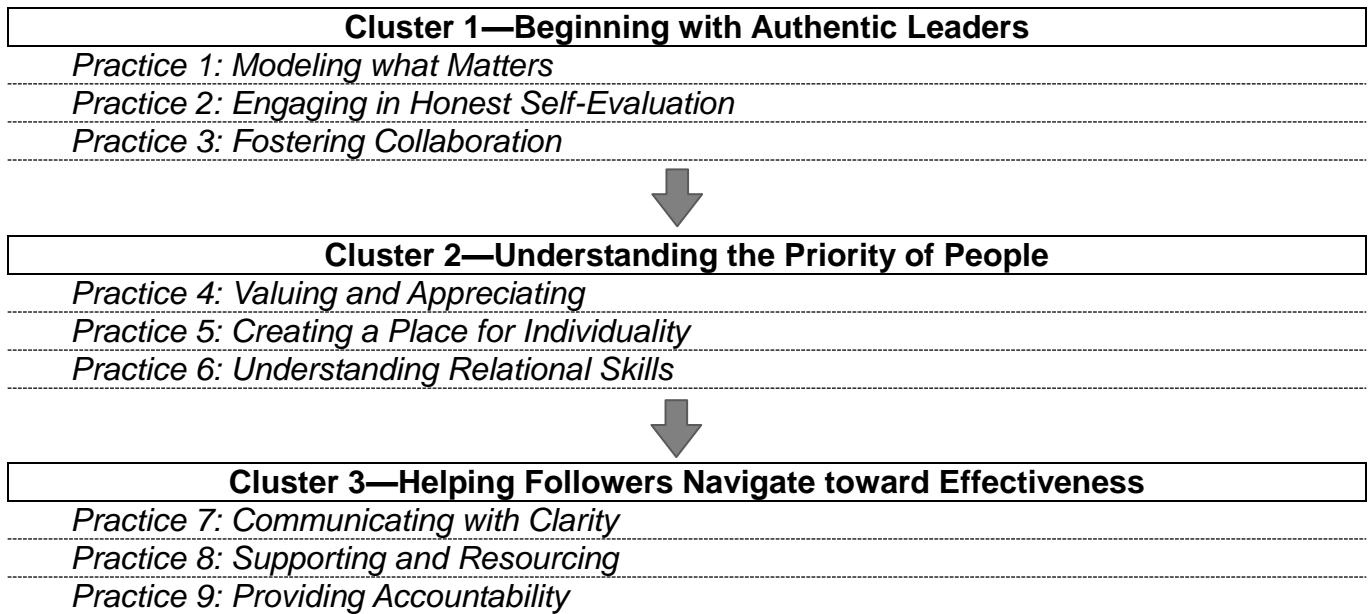


Fig. 1. A model for effective servant leadership practices.

In the following sections each of the leadership practices included in the above model are described in brief based on structured interviews with nine leadership practitioners and scholars. In addition to basic demographic questions, each of these nine individuals provided responses to eighteen structured questions—two questions for each of the nine servant leadership practices in the model.

¹³ Justin A. Irving and Gail J. Longbotham, "Team Effectiveness and Six Essential Servant Leadership Themes: A Regression Model Based on Items in the Organizational Leadership Assessment," *International Journal of Leadership Studies* 2, no. 2 (2007): 98-113; Justin A. Irving and Gail J. Longbotham, "Leading Effective Teams through Servant Leadership: An Expanded Regression Model of Essential Servant Leadership Themes," *Proceedings of the American Society of Business and Behavioral Sciences* 14, no. 1 (2007): 806-817.

¹⁴ Irving and Longbotham, "Leading Effective Teams."

III: CLUSTER 1—BEGINNING WITH AUTHENTIC LEADERS

The first grouping of servant leadership practices presented in the model emphasizes the importance of beginning with authentic leaders who are able to foster collaboration. In this first cluster of servant leadership practices, leadership behaviors associated with effective teams include the following: (1) modeling what matters, (2) engaging in honest self-evaluation, and (3) fostering collaboration. Each of these practices is described in brief, but collectively emphasizes the importance of beginning with authentic leaders.

Practice 1: Modeling What Matters

Similar to Bass and Avolio's¹⁵ discussion of idealized influence in transformational leadership theory and Kouzes and Posner's¹⁶ first practice of exemplary leadership—Model the Way—this practice identified in Irving and Longbotham's¹⁷ expanded analysis is *modeling what matters*. Inauthentic leaders can demand of followers what they as leaders are unwilling to do. Authentic leaders, however, must model what matters and be willing to “practice what they preach” when it comes to expected organizational behavior. On this point, research participants noted that modeling what matters “is the primary and most effective way to communicate the organization’s mission, values, and ethos,” and that “actions communicate much more loudly than words” when it comes to organizational values. Reinforcing the importance of this leadership practice, De Pree¹⁸ argues that “clearly expressed and consistently demonstrated values” are often the most important factor in facilitating the important relationship between leaders and followers.

Practice 2: Engaging in Honest Self-Evaluation

Serving as a foundation for authentic modeling of what matters, the next servant leadership practice in this model is *engaging in honest self-evaluation*. One of the unique features of this practice is its emphasis on self-evaluation sequentially prior to the leader’s evaluation of others. Similar to the Biblical admonition to “first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye,”¹⁹ engaging in honest self-evaluation requires leader humility, a capacity for self-awareness, and a willingness to reflect on personal faults and shortcomings which shape the organizational environment and leader–follower relationships. Ferch argued that “one of the defining characteristics of human nature is the ability to discern one’s own faults, to be broken as the result of such faults, and in response to seek a meaningful change.”²⁰ Leaders are not exempt from such important human characteristics.

Emphasizing the importance of this leadership practice, research participants noted

¹⁵ Bernard M. Bass and Bruce J. Avolio, *Improving Organizational Effectiveness Through Transformational Leadership* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994).

¹⁶ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

¹⁷ Irving and Longbotham, “Leading Effective Teams.”

¹⁸ Max De Pree, *Leadership Jazz* (New York: Currency-Doubleday, 1992), 126.

¹⁹ Mt 7:5.

²⁰ Shann Ferch, “Servant-Leadership, Forgiveness, and Social Justice,” *International Journal of Servant-Leadership* 1, no. 1 (2005): 97-113.

among other things the danger of leader blind spots and unquestioned assumptions. One participant noted, “Honest self-evaluation is utterly important for leaders,” and that, “the blind spots of leaders tend to be far more destructive than the blind spots of non-leaders [because leaders] . . . impact more people.” Participants further noted the dangers of unconscious self-exaltation and the drift toward arrogance and individualism, arguing that honest self-evaluation is best accomplished when trusted friends are invited to provide the leader with feedback on their growth edges. In addition to effecting the leader’s personal growth, the absence of honest self-evaluation on the part of leaders decreases the capacity of teams to change and attain goals in an effective manner.

Practice 3: Fostering Collaboration

The next servant leadership practice in the model is *fostering collaboration*. In contrast to overly competitive leadership agendas, this leadership behavior highlights the importance of leaders encouraging followers to work together over competing against one another in the organizational environment. Similar to Laub’s²¹ and Spears’²² discussions of building community that highlight collaboration with others as a key to community building, this leadership behavior is driven by a belief that collaborative endeavors serve as a pathway to effective team performance. Noting the importance of fostering collaboration, one research participant argues that, “solutions to complex problems today often require a collaborative engagement with others, the collective of which will generate the best solution.” Another participant acknowledges that no one person can meet the demands placed on leadership, and thus “collaboration allows a leader to expand the leadership resources brought into the leadership process.”

Providing a key argument for viewing this practice in the first cluster of beginning with authentic leaders, one participant notes the danger of collaborative gestures coming across as token invitations for follower participation. When a leader “just wants to appear like he/she is collaborating, but doesn’t really care about input from others,” such inauthentic collaborative gestures become toxic for leader–follower relationships and the broader organizational culture. However, when genuine respect for followers is blended with a listening posture, a suspension of leader predispositions, and a willingness to give credit to others and embrace solutions that come from others, there is great power in leaders working with followers on genuinely collaborative agendas.

IV: CLUSTER 2—UNDERSTANDING THE PRIORITY OF PEOPLE

The second grouping of servant leadership practices in the model emphasizes the importance of valuing and relating with people as individuals. In this second cluster of servant leadership practices, leadership behaviors associated with effective teams include the following: (1) valuing and appreciating, (2) creating a place for individuality, and (3) understanding relational skills. Each of these practices is described in brief, but collectively emphasizes the importance of understanding the priority of people.

²¹ Jim Laub, “Assessing the Servant Organization: Development of the Servant Organizational Leadership (SOLA) Instrument,” *Dissertation Abstracts International* 60, no. 2 (1999): 308.

²² Larry C. Spears, “The Understanding and Practice of Servant Leadership,” *International Journal of Servant Leadership* 1, no. 1 (2005): 29-46.

Practice 4: Valuing and Appreciating

Understanding the priority of people begins with a basic commitment to *valuing and appreciating* people. While this includes the communication of appreciation for follower contribution as a primary focus, it also emphasizes the value and trust of people at a more basic level. Laub's model of servant leadership emphasizes the value of people as one of six key markers of organizational health. On this point, Laub writes:

Healthy organizations have a different view of people. People are to be valued and developed, not used. . . . Leaders accept the fact that people have present value not just future potential. People seem to have an innate ability to know whether or not they are being valued . . . whether or not they are trusted. Effective leaders accept a person's value up front. They give them the gift of trust without requiring that they earn it first. As leaders work with people in organizations they will serve them by displaying the qualities of Valuing People.²³

Several research participants highlight similar observations, noting the importance of trust in valuing and appreciating followers when they are "given responsibility and released to accomplish the task without second guesses," and when "verbally appreciate[ing] them as people first, then for their contribution to the team." Another participant noted that a follower feels valued and appreciated "when a leader authentically and legitimately applauds the performance of a follower and acknowledges their unique contributions with concrete examples." Such expressions must be connected with reality, though, and in the words of this participant must be "genuine, deserved, and observable" if such expressions are to be effective.

Practice 5: Creating a Place for Individuality

Rather than followers being viewed as simple cogs in a larger organizational machine, servant leaders help in *creating a place for individuality*. While outcomes matter in organizations and holding followers accountable around key outcomes is consistent with servant leadership practice—a point raised below—outcomes are not necessarily achieved in uniform follower behaviors. In contrast, this leadership behavior emphasizes both allowing for individuality of style and expression in followers as well as accepting followers for who they are as individuals. In contrast to the overly mechanized systems encouraged in some twentieth-century managerial models, Irving and Longbotham's²⁴ analysis challenges twenty-first century leaders to remember the individual and create space for individuality in work performance.

Research participants note the importance of simple expressions of individuality such as work styles, clothing, and office hours, and that flexibility for follower expressions of individuality are best supported through the avoidance of micromanaging leadership behaviors. One participant notes, "Set strategic goals, but allow individuals to engage in creative processes to get there." On the theme of how follower individuality coincides with organizational unity, participants noted commonality at the level of mission, vision, goals, and

²³ OLA Group, "Servant Leadership," James A. Laub, http://www.olagroup.com/Display.asp?Page=servant_leadership (accessed February 27, 2011).

²⁴ Irving and Longbotham, "Leading Effective Teams."

values provides “the glue that holds the organization together,” and that “under this umbrella there is ample room for individuality.” Arguing that great leaders find ways to meld the needs of individuals with the needs of an organization, one participant argues that this “requires the leader to take an active interest in the capacity of those under their leadership,” and assigning responsibility and delegating authority “based on the giftedness of the follower in alignment with the project or task to be completed.” This requires an individualized consideration similar to what Bass and Avolio²⁵ put forward in transformational leadership theory, and calls leaders to a higher level of investment in creating space for individuals to work uniquely toward common goals.

Practice 6: Understanding Relational Skills

This second cluster, which is focused on understanding the priority of people, ends with the servant leadership practice of *understanding relational skills*. Knowing how to get along with people can feel like an overly simplistic leadership skill, but the analysis supporting the model in this reflection demonstrates that this is a key leadership behavior for team effectiveness. The intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences put forward by Gardner²⁶ formed the basis for Goleman’s²⁷ treatment of emotional intelligence as a key for understanding what makes a leader. Arguably, Goleman’s emphasis on factors such as empathy and social skills, premised on self-awareness, provide a basis for effective relational skills. Self-awareness leading to an awareness of and responsiveness to the needs of others provides a platform on which effective leaders may appropriately humanize the leader–follower relational engagement.

These themes of self-awareness, empathy, and authentic listening were also highlighted by the research participants as they noted important characteristics of effective relational skills. One participant noted that empathetic communication, personal connection, selective vulnerability, and attention to what motivates followers are all critical relational skills. Other participants emphasized the importance of authentic listening, the importance of a commitment to fairness and equality, the ability to tolerate and accept appropriate differences, the importance of knowing oneself well in order to relate authentically with others, and the embodiment of confidence blended with the ability to see future possibilities and communicate the most appropriate path to get there. Additional practices such as creating a sense of safety and support for followers, demonstrating care and kindness, reinforcing a commitment to the working relationship, and maintaining an open and approachable posture toward followers are also key relational skills that help foster positive leader–follower relationships.

V: CLUSTER 3—HELPING FOLLOWERS NAVIGATE TOWARD EFFECTIVENESS

The third grouping of servant leadership practices in the model emphasizes clear communication and the supporting of individuals toward outcomes for which they are accountable. In this third cluster of servant leadership practices, leadership behaviors associated with effective teams include the following: (1) communicating with clarity, (2) supporting and resourcing, and (3) providing accountability. Each of these practices is

²⁵ Bass and Avolio, *Improving Organizational Effectiveness*.

²⁶ Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

²⁷ Daniel Goleman, “What Makes A Leader?” *Harvard Business Review* 76, no. 6 (1998): 92-102.

described in brief, but collectively emphasizes the importance of helping followers navigate toward effectiveness.

Practice 7: Communicating with Clarity

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of clear communication on the part of leaders. Although all effective communicators are not necessarily leaders, it is arguable that all effective leaders must be effective communicators. As we move into the third cluster focused on helping followers navigate toward effectiveness, the seventh effective servant leadership practice in the model is *communicating with clarity*. Most dominantly seen in the analyses as effectively communicating the plans and goals for the organization, research participants note several critical features of effective communication in the leadership role. Several of the key communication features noted by research participants were honesty, transparency, authenticity, clarity, listening, timeliness, confidence without arrogance, conciseness, regularity and appropriately repetitious, congruence of verbal and nonverbal messages, use of a diverse set of communication media, use of word pictures, saying what you mean and meaning what you say, and not communicating with overly emotionally laden volatile overtones. Leaders who learn to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts and through a variety of communication pathways are helping followers and their organizations navigate toward effectiveness.

Practice 8: Supporting and Resourcing

In addition to clear communication, followers also need their servant leaders to practice *supporting and resourcing*. This leadership behavior is centrally characterized by leaders providing followers with the support and resources they need to meet their goals. Rather than leaders viewing their primary role as driving followers toward production, a commitment to supporting and resourcing allows leaders to focus on serving followers toward their success and being responsive to their needs as they work toward organizational goals. This practice focused on supporting and resourcing captures some of what is included in Kouzes and Posner's²⁸ theme of enable others to act in their five practices of exemplary leadership. Leaders take a positive position toward followers, working to remove barriers and build necessary bridges so that followers may thrive in their responsibilities.

On this theme, research participants emphasized the importance of removing barriers, and one participant noted the special importance of being active in the identification of needs, noting that the leader "should be the first to ask 'what do we need to get the job done' versus being passive, waiting for requests to come to him/her and then trying to put the requests off as long as possible." Other participants add that because leaders are in the position to see the best allocation of resources and to draw out the gifting of human resources so that followers are fulfilled in their work, it is important that leaders share explanations with followers regarding how resources are apportioned and when resources are not available for certain needs. One participant's response captures the essence of this servant leadership behavior noting that leaders carry out this function best when they release power and resources to members to accomplish critical and expected initiatives. If the mission of the community matters, then leaders have the responsibility of providing the support and

²⁸ Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*.

resources necessary for followers to work toward their goals in light of this mission.

Practice 9: Providing Accountability

The final servant leadership practice included in this model is the leadership behavior of *providing accountability*. Rather than servant leadership being a weak form of leadership that is disinterested in results, this leadership behavior identified in Irving and Longbotham's analyses affirms the vital role of holding people accountable for reaching their goals. Arguing the importance of mission accomplishment, Patterson²⁹ argues that pursuing "a mission does not mean . . . that organizations with servant leaders are unsuccessful; quite the contrary is true." Although servant leadership begins with a focus on followers, a commitment to providing accountability is consistent with a commitment to valuing and developing followers.

As with the leadership practice of communicating with clarity, several research participants reaffirmed the priority of clear communication in the providing of accountability for followers. In contrast to some of the negative examples provided by participants—examples where leaders failed to clearly communicate and then terminated or disciplined employees based on poor performance—there was a unified call to proactive and honest communication around expectations and follower performance. One participant noted, "I prefer honest performance evaluations—those which acknowledge both strengths and growth fronts and clearly set goals that can be reached quarterly and annually." Another participant similarly noted that, "honest and open communication that is regular and consistent at setting and reaching goals is very effective in developing accountability and building trust." Another participant notes that "leaders inspect what they expect," and this is arguably consistent with the leader-love that characterizes a servant leaders commitment to serving the needs of the follower over the needs of the leader. Engaging in direct and honest conversation with followers around outcomes that are important to followers and the organization provides an opportunity for follower development, a tangible factor associated with valuing and developing people.

VI: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this reflection, Biblical roots for servant leadership were presented alongside nine core servant leadership practices associated with team effectiveness. The Biblical call to servant-oriented behaviors—a call most dominantly seen in the example and teaching of Jesus—is a call that is not only Biblical, but also is demonstrably effective. As leaders take up the call to walk the servant-oriented pathway of Christ, it is my hope that the model presented and described in this reflection provides practical insights for present and emerging leaders as they seek to implement servant leadership practices in their work with followers, teams, and organizations.

²⁹ Kathleen Patterson, "Servant Leadership: A Theoretical Model," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 64, no. 2 (2003): 4.

About the Author

Justin A. Irving, M.Div., Ph.D., serves as associate professor of ministry leadership and director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Bethel Seminary, a school of Bethel University (St. Paul, Minnesota). His role at Bethel Seminary and with the Center for Transformational Leadership is focused on preparing people for effective leadership in a variety of ministry contexts. He has a special interest in servant and self-sacrificial leadership studies, team leadership, and the research and application of these disciplines in cross-cultural contexts. More information is available at <http://www.irvingresources.com>.

Email: j-irving@bethel.edu
