

Servant Leadership and the Effectiveness of Teams:

Findings and Implications

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While the literature on teams has flourished in late modernity, no research has been conducted on the relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness. To address this void in the literature, this pioneer research study evaluated the proposed relationship by administering Laub's Organizational Leadership Assessment, an established measure of servant leadership, and Larson and LaFasto's Team Effectiveness Questionnaire to over 200 team leaders and team members. The study found that a highly significant ($p = <.001$) correlation is present, and that this correlation is a substantially positive relationship between the two constructs. In this report, the following are covered: (a) review of the literature, (b) research methods, (c) research findings, (d) discussion and implications, and (e) recommendations for future research.

In organizational and leadership studies, the topic of teams and groups continues to hold a strong presence in the contemporary literature (e.g., Edmonson, Roberto, & Watkins, 2003; Gibson & Vermeulen, 2003; Naquin & Tynan, 2003; van der Vegt, Gerben, & Janssen, 2003; West et al., 2003). While the reason for this is multifaceted, this strong presence is due in part to the increased complexity of today's organizational environments. As Manz and Sims (1993) note, "The emergence of the global marketplace has forced organizations to consider new ways of dealing with the competitive challenge" (p. 185). For many organizations, this new way has been through the use of team-based structures.

Due to the increased interest in and use of teams in organizational settings, today's organizational leaders are asking some important questions such as: (a) What type of leadership works for teams?, and (b) What type of leadership is able to help facilitate greater team effectiveness within these new organizational environments? Evidencing the importance of such questions, LaFasto and Larson (2001) argue that there are six important dimensions to team leadership: (a) Focusing on the Goal, (b) Ensuring a Collaborative Climate, (c) Building Confidence, (d) Demonstrating Sufficient Technical Know-How, (e) Setting Priorities, and (f) Managing Performance.

While the six dimensions of team leadership addressed by LaFasto and Larson's (2001) are vital, might there be additional leadership-oriented factors that contribute to team effectiveness? In order to help address such a question, this research project was designed to answer whether or not a positive correlation between servant leadership behaviors and team effectiveness exists. A positive answer to this question will necessarily imply that the research and literature surrounding servant leadership will become an even more vital area for further exploration for anyone interested in improving the effectiveness of organizational teams. In the remainder of the paper, the following important dimensions of this research project will be addressed: (a) review of the literature, (b) research methods, (c) research findings, (d) discussion and implications, and (e) recommendations for further research.

Review of the Literature

Servant Leadership

Most reviews of the literature on servant leadership begin with Greenleaf's (1977) seminal work. In Greenleaf's work, it is argued that foundationally servant leaders—by definition—must be servant's first. From this servant-first paradigm, servants are suited to take on leadership functions and responsibilities as servant leaders. Flowing from Greenleaf's work, a number of theoretical pieces have emerged directly and indirectly related to servant leadership (e.g., Blanchard, 1998; Buchen, 1998; Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Graham, 1995; Hebert, 2004; Jennings & Stahl-Wert, 2003; Laub, 1999, 2003; McGee-Copper & Looper, 2001; Patterson, 2003; Quay, 1997; Sendjava, 2003; Spears, 1995, 1998; Spears & Lawrence, 2002; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2003; Winston, 2003; Wong, 2003).

While some quantitative research is included in the above noted authors (e.g., Laub, 1999; Hebert, 2004), most of these works are theoretical in nature. This fact is mostly attributable to the relatively new interest in the field by scholars. More research—both quantitative and qualitative in nature—is needed to establish a solid research baseline that may be used to inform the practice of servant leadership in contemporary organizations. One of the open areas for research surrounding servant leadership is its relationship to teams and team effectiveness.

Team Leadership

The area of teams has been of substantial interest for organizational scholars and practitioners in the past two decades. This focus on teams has likely arose out of the changing culture of the late-modern period, the increasing demands of global competition, and the associated need for organizational operations to happen in a collaborative manner. While these influences are likely accurate, as Larson and LaFasto (1989) observe, "we seem to lack the essential ability to work together effectively" (p. 13). Out of such observations and their subsequent research, Larson and LaFasto present their findings on what must go right for teams to function well. In their well-know book on teamwork, Larson and LaFasto present eight essential characteristics of effective teams, which serve as the foundation for the instrument utilized in the research presented in this paper.

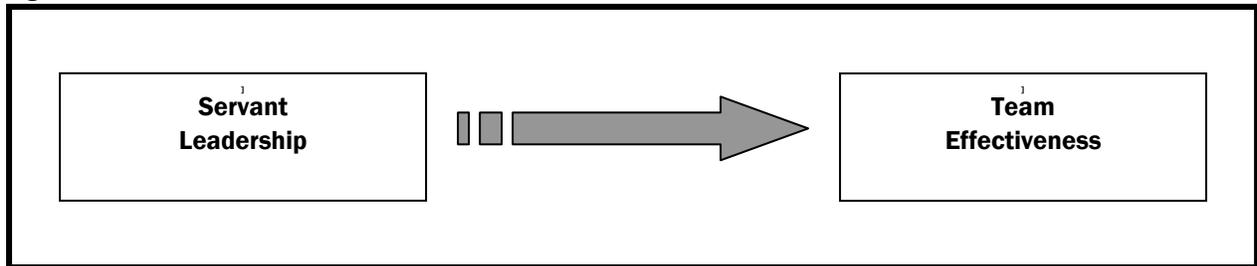
One of the areas of emerging interest is the practice of global teams. Authors such as Manz and Sims (1993) and Marquardt and Horvath (2001) are some of the authors addressing this important dimension of team research. In an article addressing the benefits, challenges, and practice of team leadership in the global context, Irving (2004) argues that the use of team leadership in multinational organizations holds out a promising set of benefits: (a) facilitation of cultural sensitivity, (b) increased member satisfaction, (c) marked cost advantage, (d) nationalization of global partners internally, (e) contextualization of organizational mission, (f) mosaic of multiple perspectives, (g) harnessed creative tension, (h) structure for responsive adaptability, and (i) positioning for innovation.

Whether for national or multinational teams, the issue of team effectiveness is of great interest to researchers and practitioners alike. Team effectiveness has been measured in relation to many variables. Leon, List, and Magor's (2004) examination of team effectiveness in light of personal experience; Gibson, Zellmer-Bruhn, and Schwab's (2003) examination in the context of multinational organizations; Ozaralli's (2003) examination in light of transformational leadership; Cox's (2003) examination in light of types of conflict; De Dreu (2002)

examination in light of innovation; and Jordan, Ashkanasy, Hartel, and Hooper's (2002) examination in light of workgroup emotional intelligence, all serve as examples of research on team effectiveness. While the study of team effectiveness has been analyzed with many variables in mind, up to this point it has never been analyzed in light of servant leadership. Therefore, the findings presented in this paper serve to further the literature on teams and team effectiveness by addressing this void.

Flowing out of this literature stream, it was hypothesized for the current study that a positive correlation exists between the servant leadership behaviors measured by the Organizational Leadership Assessment and the characteristics of effective teams measured by the Team Effectiveness Questionnaire. Figure 1 offers a basic model for the proposed hypothesis.

Figure 1



The study reported in the following sections was designed to answer the following research question: “Is there a positive correlation between the servant leadership behaviors measured by the Organizational Leadership Assessment and the characteristics of effective teams measured by the Team Effectiveness Questionnaire?” Toward the end of answering this question, the research methods, research findings, and research implications will be addressed.

Research Methods

Instruments

The research hypothesis and associated question flows out of the afore-noted void in the literature. Similarly, the instruments utilized in this study also flow out of the literature, for the works of Laub (1999) and Larson and LaFasto (1989) have become closely associated with the constructs of servant leadership and teams accordingly. In light of the prominence of these scholars in their respective areas of study, Laub's Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA) and Larson and LaFasto's Team Effectiveness Questionnaire (TEQ) have been selected to measure the two constructs of servant leadership and team effectiveness.

OLA. Discussing the theoretical foundation for the OLA, Laub (2003) notes that the instrument was developed in an attempt to answer three primary questions: (a) How is servant leadership defined?, (b) What are the characteristics of servant leadership?, and (c) Can the presence of these characteristics within organizations be assessed through a written instrument? Laub's research began with a Delphi investigation into the essential characteristics of servant leadership. Through this Delphi process, six primary factors were identified and validated. Following this, Laub then conducted a broader field test of the reliability of the OLA instrument, which was developed based on the Delphi findings. Laub's (1999) research found that the OLA was highly reliable, possessing strong construct and face validity.

The following is a list of the six primary subscales of the OLA, along with a seventh scale that provides comparative items on job satisfaction: (a) Values People, (b) Develops People, (c) Builds Community, (d) Displays Authenticity, (e) Provides Leadership, (f) Shares Leadership, and (g) Job Satisfaction. Together, the six primary items of the OLA assess the essential features of servant leadership in the organizational setting. As such, the OLA, as an established instrument, was a natural choice for use in the present study.

TEQ. The TEQ was designed to assess the eight factors identified by Larson and LaFasto (1989) as being associated with effective teams. The subscales of team effectiveness measured in the TEQ are: (a) Clear Elevating Goal, (b) Results-Driven Structure, (c) Competent Team Members, (d) Unified Commitment, (e)

Collaborative Climate, (f) Standards of Excellence, (g) External Support/Recognition, and (h) Principled Leadership. Larson and LaFasto's classic book on teamwork provides a detailed overview of each of the factors included in the TEQ. The identification of these eight characteristics of effective teams was derived by means of Larson and LaFasto's grounded theory approach to research. This qualitative research eventually led to the creation of the quantitative instrument utilized in this study.

Research Sample

The research sample ($N=202$) was drawn from a broad pool of team leaders and team participants in churches, nonprofits, and businesses through random sampling procedures. The survey participants were guaranteed their anonymity and participation was on a voluntary basis. While there are participants from each of these three sectors, it is important to note that the sample in this study is made-up primarily from teams in churches (81.68%), with some comparative participants in nonprofits (10.89%), and businesses (7.43%). The N values for each of these are: (a) 165 in church teams, (b) 22 in nonprofit teams, and (c) 15 in business teams. Thirty organizations were contacted to participate in the study, and 17 of these opted to participate. Of the participating organizations, 11 were churches, 4 were nonprofits, and 2 were businesses.

For the purpose of this study, the operational definition of "team" utilized was adopted from Larson and LaFasto's (1989) work. Distinguishing teams from groups, Larson and LaFasto note that a team has (a) two or more people, (b) a specific performance objective or recognizable goal to be attained, and (c) a coordination of activity among the members of the team that is requisite for the attainment of the team goal or objective. While some groups may share the first two characteristics of this definition, it is the coordination of activity that is a distinguishing mark of teams. Within this study, team leaders and team participants fell within this definition of a team.

Data Analysis

Once collected, the data was analyzed utilizing the correlation coefficient, or the Pearson r correlation. The scale for the correlation coefficient goes from + 1.0, representing a perfect positive correlation, to -1.0, representing a perfect negative correlation. The score on this scale— r representing the correlation coefficient—was interpreted based on a scale offered by Guilford (1956): (a) $< .20$ = slight, almost negligible relationship; (b) $.20-.40$ = low correlation, definite but small relationship; (c) $.40-.70$ = moderate correlation, substantial relationship; (d) $.70-.90$ = high correlation, marked relationship; and (e) $> .90$ = very high correlation, very dependable relationship. The Guilford scale provides a consistent means for interpreting the statistical correlation found in the study, and is to be evaluated in light of the p values, or significance levels. In this study, the significance level was set at $< .01$ in a two-tailed Pearson r correlation.

Research Findings

OLA & TEQ

In order to address the primary research hypothesis, the means for each of the participants ($N=202$) were tabulated and then the Pearson r was calculated for the relationship between the OLA means and the TEQ means. The Pearson r findings for the total sample was $+ .592$ with a significance level of $p = < .001$. As such, the research hypothesis is accepted, because $r \neq 0$.

The highly significant p value of $< .001$ indicates that the probability that this correlation is attributable to chance or random error is virtually .000%. Based on the Guilford (1956) scale noted above, the $+ .592$ r value is indicative of a substantial relationship between the two constructs. Both the Guilford classification of "substantial relationship" and the extremely high significance level of $< .001$ confirm that the relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness is statistically sound and practically noteworthy.

Correlations by Sector

In addition to calculating the Pearson r for the total sample, the Pearson r was also calculated in a similar manner for each of the sectors included in the study: (a) church, (b) nonprofit, and (c) business. While the church and nonprofit sectors performed similarly— $+ .563$ and $+ .547$ accordingly—the business sector's Pearson r value is indicative of a high correlation of $+ .758$ with a highly significant p value of $.001$. Table 1

provides the numeric data for all of the sectors, including the *N* values, which are important when evaluating the data by sector division.

Table 1
OLA-TEQ Pearson Correlations by Sector

Group/Sector	N	Pearson <i>r</i>	Significance	Guilford Scale
Entire Sample	202	.592	.000	Moderate/Substantial
Nonprofit	22	.547	.008	Moderate/Substantial
Church	165	.563	.000	Moderate/Substantial
Business	15	.758	.001	High/Marked

OLA and Job Satisfaction

Used as a comparative criterion scale, Job Satisfaction has been determined to be significantly correlated with the servant leadership behaviors of the OLA (Hebert, 2004; Laub, 1999). Laub found a significant ($p < .01$) positive correlation of .653, and Hebert found a significant ($p < .001$) positive correlation of .6677.

Table 2
OLA-Job Satisfaction Pearson Correlations by Sector

Group/Sector	N	Pearson <i>r</i>	Significance	Guilford Scale
Entire Sample	202	.625	.000	Moderate/Substantial
Nonprofit	22	.644	.001	Moderate/Substantial
Church	165	.551	.000	Moderate/Substantial
Business	15	.775	.001	High/Marked

It is noteworthy that the findings in the present study (see Table 2) similarly indicate a significant ($p < .001$) positive correlation of .625. Not only does this demonstrate consistency with previous research uses of the OLA, it also provides a comparative correlation to measure against the Pearson *r* for the OLA and the TEQ. In addition to providing the correlation coefficient for the entire study, Table 2 also provides the Pearson *r* values for the relationship between the OLA and Job Satisfaction in a breakdown by sector.

Because the relationship between servant leadership—measured by the OLA—and Job Satisfaction has previously been established, it is helpful to view the similarities of performance between the two correlation sets: (a) The OLA and TEQ, and (b) The OLA and Job Satisfaction. As Table 3 illustrates, there is marked similarity between the two correlation sets with only .033 separating the two Pearson *r* values for the entire sample, and only .017 separating the two Pearson *r* values for the higher correlation findings among the business sector.

Table 3
Comparison of Correlations Sets

Group/Sector	OLA-TEQ		OLA-Job Satisfaction	
	Pearson <i>r</i>	Significance	Pearson <i>r</i>	Significance
Entire Sample	.592	.000	.625	.000
Nonprofit	.547	.008	.644	.001
Church	.563	.000	.551	.000
Business	.758	.001	.775	.001

Correlations by Position

The data was additionally broken down by position. The OLA includes a request for research participants to indicate their position within their organization. The three options are (a) Top Leadership, (b) Management, and (c) Workforce. The findings of the research analysis by position are included in Table 4.

Table 4
OLA-TEQ Pearson Correlations by Position

Group/Sector	N	Pearson <i>r</i>	Significance	Guilford Scale
Top Leadership	25	.467	.019	Moderate/Substantial
Management	49	.480	.000	Moderate/Substantial
Workforce	113	.666	.000	Moderate/Substantial
Undeclared	12	.826	.001	High/Marked

While the high correlation by those who did not specify their position is interesting, this data cannot be interpreted with any real value. The important points to note in the findings by position are the following. First, there is similarity in the responses of Top Leadership and Management. Second, while the workforce Pearson *r* is still within the same Guilford Scale category of moderate, there is a significant numeric increase to observe between the workforce *r* (+.666) and the Top Leadership (+.467) and Management (+.480) *r* values.

Correlations by Employment Status

In addition to breakdowns by sector and position, some of the sample participants also included a breakdown of their employment status—paid or volunteer. This dimension was included by some organizations due to the frequent use of volunteers on teams in the church and nonprofit sectors. The *N* value of the participants included in this breakdown is 74, and Figure 5 provides the associated data. The high correlation within the “paid” status is noteworthy.

Table 5
OLA-TEQ Pearson Correlations by Employment Status

Group/Sector	N	Pearson <i>r</i>	Significance	Guilford Scale
Paid	35	.733	.000	High/Marked
Volunteer	39	.554	.000	Moderate/Substantial
Undeclared	126	.567	.000	Moderate/Substantial

Matrix of Intercorrelations

The final portion of this research findings section provides a matrix of intercorrelations between the subscales of the two instruments (see Table 6). For economy of space, the following abbreviations will be used for the TEQ subscales in the matrix: (a) Clear Elevating Goal (CEG), (b) Results-Driven Structure (RDS), (c) Competent Team Members (CTM), (d) Unified Commitment (UC), (e) Collaborative Climate (CC), (f) Standards of Excellence (SOE), (g) External Support/Recognition (ES/R), and (h) Principled Leadership (PL). In this matrix of intercorrelations, the Pearson *r* values are provided for the interrelationships between Job Satisfaction, the OLA, the TEQ, and for each of the subscales of these two instruments.

Table 6
Matrix of Intercorrelations**

	Job Satisf.	OLA Mean	Values People	Develops People	Builds Comm.	Displays Authen.	Provides Lead.	Shares Lead.
Job Satisf.	–	.625	.661	.626	.531	.569	.524	.58
TEQ Mean	.481	.592	.558	.566	.571	.513	.607	.511
CEG	.348	.329	.290	.310	.279	.274	.406	.28
RDS	.22	.283	.243	.268	.240	.240	.367	.23
CTM	.26	.293	.315	.235	.298	.257	.245	.29
UC	.24	.342	.344	.341	.341	.307	.321	.26
CC	.41	.487	.483	.450	.508	.440	.428	.42
SOE	.33	.340	.302	.370	.318	.283	.372	.26
ES/R	.29	.436	.429	.428	.428	.375	.407	.38
PL	.42	.554	.512	.528	.537	.480	.571	.48

** All Pearson *r* correlations in the matrix are positive and significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Discussion and Implications

Important Considerations

Nature of Population. As a discussion of the implications of these findings is introduced there are several important considerations to take into account. The first consideration is the nature of the population. While the substantial or marked relationship has been confirmed in multiple sectors—as well as from those in multiple positions and multiple employment statuses—the findings in the business and nonprofit sectors need to be taken in light of the limited sample numbers.

Nature of Instruments. The second consideration is the nature of the instruments. Both were designed primarily for use among business or governmental organizations, and not necessarily churches. The church-based findings provide data from a broader application of these instruments in a new population environment. This consideration may help explain the higher correlation values of the OLA and the TEQ among the sample taken from the business sector.

Nature of Effectiveness and Context. The third consideration is the nature of effectiveness and context. When engaging the topic of leadership or team effectiveness, the literature argues that context is a mediating variable. The following authors are examples of those arguing that context is important in the assessment of leadership effectiveness: Klenke (1996); Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch (2002); Leavy, (2003); and Irving and Klenke (In press). As with leadership effectiveness, so team effectiveness is best evaluated in light of contextual parameters. For this reason, the assessment of leadership or team effectiveness often necessitates a contextual evaluation, a consideration identified by Doolen, Hacker, and Van Aken (2003).

Servant Leadership and Team Effectiveness

Regarding the primary findings of the study, the substantial (+.592) and highly significant ($p = <.001$) relationship between the servant leadership behaviors measured by the OLA and team effectiveness measured by the TEQ indicates several important points of reflection. First, it is important to reiterate that the findings support the research hypothesis, for $r \neq 0$. Second, in light of the acceptance of the research hypothesis, servant leadership becomes an important additional consideration for those interested in how teams function effectively. Because servant leadership behaviors are seen as statistically related to the effective performance of teams, organizations utilizing teams will benefit from paying attention to creating an organizational environment that fosters team effectiveness through servant leadership.

OLA and Job Satisfaction

The similarity of performance between the OLA-TEQ correlation set and the OLA-Job Satisfaction set—again, a previously established relationship—provides additional credibility to the confirmed hypothesis in this study. Because the two correlations sets demonstrated similar performance, the hypothesized relationship may have some contextual predictability based on the correlation of the OLA and Job Satisfaction relationship in other contexts and situations, perhaps providing some predictive validity to the hypothesis of this study.

By Position

The marked difference between the OLA-TEQ correlations by position—min. of .186 difference between workforce and management/top-leadership—indicates that servant-oriented leadership is perceived by followers (“workforce”) to be more important to them than to leaders. In other words, though managers and top leaders may identify the same correlation, the workforce followers affirm the correlation more robustly. Interestingly, this observation—taken in conjunction with the recent emphasis on followership in leadership and organizational studies (e.g., Dvir & Shamir, 2003; Lester & Brower, 2003; Montesino, 2003)—may indicate a promising line of future research for those interested in looking at servant leadership more fully from the perspective of followership.

By Employment Status

Regarding the findings by employment status, the marked difference between the OLA-TEQ correlations by employment status—.179 difference between paid and volunteer team members—may indicate that paid team

members possess a greater awareness of the dynamic relationship between effectiveness and the servant-oriented behaviors of leaders. While volunteers serve as vital members of operational and programmatic teams in the nonprofit and church settings, volunteers generally do not have the situational awareness afforded to a paid team member who is likely more connected to the overall culture of the organization. While this is not a minimizing of volunteers, it may provide some explanation for the differences in the findings. As with the differences found by position, this nuance in the data related to employment status may provide an additional path for future research on servant leadership and the volunteer team member.

By Subscales

In examining the findings of how the subscales correlated to the OLA and the TEQ, several observations may be made. First, when analyzing how the OLA subscales relate with the TEQ, the two highest correlations were “Provides Leadership” (OLA-PL) and “Builds Community” (OLA-BC). These are logical findings, for community builders who provide vision, set direction, and align and motivate people (Kotter, 1990) help to establish the collaborative environment and direction necessary to bring about effectiveness in the team context. Second, when analyzing how the TEQ subscales relate with the OLA, the two highest correlations were “Principled Leadership” (TEQ-PL) and “Collaborative Climate” (TEQ-CC). Interestingly, the two highest correlation subscales possess and emphasize the priority of (a) leadership and (b) the facilitation of a collaborative climate. This pairing provides a first-among-equals priority set for those seeking to effectively lead teams.

In Practice

Having highlighted several of the important implications from the findings, it is important to emphasize what these research findings mean for leadership practice in the organizational setting. To put it directly, leaders must take away from this research the fact that servant-oriented leadership matters. The command and control styles of leadership which traditionally may have been associated with results in hierarchal organizations are giving way to more dispersed structures that enable and empower others to excel and perform.

The type of leadership that will bring about the enabling and empowerment needed in these new team-based decentralized structures must take a new face; it must take on the face of servant leadership. Servant leadership—leadership that authentically values and develops people, builds community, and masterfully balances the necessary providing and sharing of leadership—provides a form of leadership that will complement the trend toward team-based structures, and in so complementing these structures, servant leadership will help facilitate great effectiveness among these teams as members are enabled, equipped, and empowered.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provides a solid foundation for future examination into the relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness. As has already been noted, the connections between servant leadership and followership or volunteers may be interesting paths for future research inquiry. Additional recommendations may be broken down into quantitative and qualitative research questions. Quantitatively, the following questions may provide interesting paths for future research: (a) Will the findings in the present study be confirmed in other populations or sectors (e.g., government)?, (b) Will the findings in the present study be confirmed in cross-cultural settings?, and (c) Will the high correlation observed in the business sector be confirmed with a larger sample size?

Qualitatively, the following questions may provide interesting paths for future research as well: (a) Why does the relationship between servant leadership behaviors and team effectiveness exist?, and (b) Why is there a statistical difference based on context? Whether pursued quantitatively, qualitatively, or through a mixed-method approach, the relationship between servant leadership and teams is a promising area for those concerned about the effectiveness of organizational teams. Ongoing work in this area will help to gain a better picture of the terrain of factors contributing to the practice of team effectiveness.

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, the findings and implications from the investigation into the relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness have been provided. The proposed hypothesis was found to be substantial and statistically significant, thus paving the way for further discussion and research on the importance and practice of servant leadership in the facilitation of team effectiveness. While an initial model was proposed at the beginning of the paper along with the research hypothesis, one additional component may be added in light of the findings—context (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

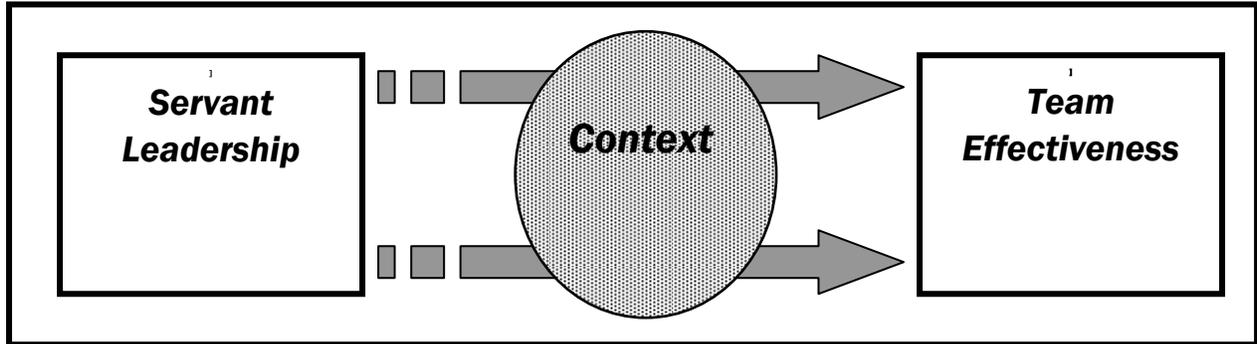


Figure 2 provides a model suggesting a relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness, and yet includes an additional mediating variable that shapes the corollary influence. Due to the marked difference in the findings by sector, this seems to be a logically sound addition to the working model. It may serve as a useful reminder to those who are investigating the relationship between these constructs to account for the mediating influence that context has on how servant leadership relates to team effectiveness.

Beyond a theoretical exercise, the effectiveness of teams matters in today's world. Many of the teams in the governmental, educational, for-profit, nonprofit, and faith-based organizations of the world's societies will benefit from the increased effectiveness of teams that is facilitated and empowered by servant leaders. This research project captures the importance of work that seeks to bridge the traditional researcher-practitioner gap. Toward this end, it is the hope of this author that the research findings contained in this report will positively affect the practice of organizational teams as leaders engage in servant-oriented behaviors.

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