

## **IDENTIFYING PRIMARY CHARACTERISTICS OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP: DELPHI STUDY**

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The purpose of this study was to more clearly define servant leadership by identifying primary characteristics of the phenomenon through a Delphi study. Greenleaf (1977) stated that servant leadership “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (p. 13). Greenleaf clearly stated that in servant leadership, service comes before leadership. Because a servant leader serves first, we designated those characteristics of a servant as the primary characteristics of servant leadership. In order to serve first, a servant leader must first exhibit the primary characteristics and then aspire to lead. Over 100 characteristics of servant leadership have been identified in the literature (Sendjaya, 2003, p. 4). We conducted a Delphi study with scholars in the field of servant leadership and, after three rounds, 12 characteristics were identified as primary characteristics of servant leadership. These characteristics include valuing people, humility, listening, trust, caring, integrity, service, empowering, serving others’ needs before their own, collaboration, love/unconditional love, and learning.

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**M**any find it hard to accept the phenomenon of servant leadership because they do not understand how a servant can be a leader and how a leader can be a servant; that is, it seems to be an oxymoron (Russell & Stone, 2002, p. 145; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002, p. 57; Wong & Page, 2003, p. 2). However, Kiechel (1995) suggested that the two words should not be thought of as an oxymoron “but rather as a sort of Zen koan, a juxtaposition of apparent opposites meant to startle the seeker after wisdom into new insight” (p. 122). This new insight is that the leader exists to serve those whom he or she leads (Kiechel, 1995, p. 122). Some servant leaders take Kiechel’s idea further, understanding leading and serving as synonymous. Max De Pree (1992) stated, “above all, leadership is a position of servanthood. Leadership is also a position of debt; it is a forfeiture of rights” (p. 220).

### Defining Servant Leadership

In 2002, Sendjaya and Sarros stated that only anecdotal evidence exists “to support a commitment to an understanding of servant leadership. . . . One reason for the scarcity of research on servant leadership is that the very notion of ‘servant as leader’ is an oxymoron” (p. 57). In 2010, Winston stated that we still “lack a unified accepted theory of servant leadership” (p. 186). In the same year, Van Dierendonck observed, “despite its introduction four decades ago and empirical studies that started more than 10 years ago (Laub, 1999), there is still no consensus about a definition and theoretical framework of servant leadership” (p. 2).

In the same article that Greenleaf (1977) coined the term servant leadership, he gave a broad definition and stated how to best measure the phenomenon:

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant—first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, 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? (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13)

Since Greenleaf defined servant leadership in somewhat vague terms, scholars have been trying to find a more precise definition. Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) stated, “if anecdotal evidence exists, then the next step in advancing the research stream is to define the major variables” (p. 51). The first to publish his attempt to more precisely define servant leadership by identifying characteristics of the phenomenon was J. W. Graham. In 1991, Graham identified humility, relational power, autonomy, moral development of followers, and emulation of leaders’ service orientation as characteristics of servant leadership. In 1992, De Pree listed 12 characteristics of leadership in which he included integrity; vulnerability; discernment; awareness of the human spirit; courage in relationships; sense of humor; intellectual energy and curiosity; respect of the future, regard for the present, understanding of the past; predictability; breadth; comfort with ambiguity; and presence. Although De Pree did not specifically state that he was listing characteristics of servant leadership, he understood leadership to be a position of servanthood (p. 220).

In 1995, Spears published a list of 10 critical characteristics of servant leadership based on Greenleaf’s writings with the disclaimer that they were “by no means exhaustive. However, these characteristics communicate the power and promise this concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge” (p. 7). Spears’ 10 characteristics included listening, empathy, healing, persuasion, awareness, foresight, conceptualizing, commitment to growth, stewardship, and community. Spears’ list remains to this day the most respected and referred to list of servant leadership characteristics. According to Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), Spears’ work provided “the closest representation of an articulated framework for what characterizes servant leadership” (p. 302).

In 1999, Spears stated that servant leadership is “open to considerable interpretation and values judgment” and therefore attempts should not be made “to define servant leadership as a ‘fixed or complicated set of requirements’” (Spears as cited in Polleys, 2002, p. 124). He argued that “the danger . . . is that it could become so narrowly defined as to close the door on a wider

audience of people who do embrace the broadest definition of servant leadership—namely, Greenleaf’s ‘test’” (Spears as cited in Polleys, 2002, p. 124).

Many other scholars have identified additional attributes of servant leadership. In 1998, Buchen associated four characteristics with servant leadership: capacity for reciprocity, preoccupation with future, relationship building, and self-identity. In 1999, Farling et al. identified five components from the literature on servant leadership. They referred to vision and service as behavioral components and influence, credibility, and trust as relational components. Barburo and Wheeler (2006) stated that the work of Farling et al. was unclear how it differentiated from “better-understood leadership theories such as transformational leadership” (p. 302). Also in 1999, Laub listed six characteristics of servant leadership: building community, developing people, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, sharing leadership, and valuing people (p. 3).

In 2000, Russell identified “at least 20 distinguishable attributes of servant leadership” (p. 12) in the literature of which he classified nine as functional. He claimed that there was not enough literature on servant leadership at the time to “identify with specificity the attributes of servant leaders” but there was “enough consistency in the literature to make it possible to discern characteristics that should exist among servant leaders” (Russell, 2000, p. 12). Russell’s (2000) functional attributes consisted of vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment. Russell (2000) stated, “the functional attributes are the operative characteristics of servant leadership. They are identifiable characteristics that actuate leadership responsibilities” (p. 12). Russell and Stone (2002) stated that the functional attributes “determine the form and effectiveness of servant leadership” (p. 153).

Russell (2000) also identified an additional 11 characteristics that he called accompanying attributes. He defined accompanying attributes as “companion or supplemental characteristics of servant leaders” (p. 6). “The accompanying attributes supplement and augment functional attributes. They are not secondary in nature; rather, they are complementary and in some areas, prerequisites to effective servant leadership” (Russell, 2000, p. 7). Russell and Stone (2002) stated that accompanying attributes “affect the level and intensity of the functional attributes” (p. 153). These consist of communication, credibility, competence, stewardship, visibility, influence, persuasion, listening, encouragement, teaching, and delegation (Russell & Stone, 2002, p. 147).

In 2002, Barbuto and Wheeler identified 11 potential dimensions of servant leadership adding “calling” (p. 303) to Spears’ (1995) original 10. In her 2003 dissertation, Kathleen Patterson identified seven constructs of servant leadership that included love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service. In the same year, Sendjaya (2003) classified 101 characteristics into six dimensions and 22 subdimensions (p. 4).

In 2006, Barbuto and Wheeler declared that “a more precise clarification of the servant leadership construct is necessary” (p. 301). Their research produced five servant leadership “factors” (p. 300): altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, wisdom, and organizational stewardship. In 2007, Irving and Longbotham listed four characteristics of servant leadership that included engaging in honest self-evaluation, fostering collaboration, providing accountability, and supporting and resourcing (p. 105).

### Primary Characteristics

Contrary to efforts of other researchers to better define servant leadership by listing additional characteristics, we identified characteristics already existing in the literature as primary to servant leadership. Many aspects of servant leadership identified in the literature are not exclusive to servant leadership but rather are essential to all forms of effective leadership. However, a number of characteristics are only applicable to servant leadership. Greenleaf (1977) stated that servant leadership “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (p. 13). Greenleaf clearly stated that in servant leadership, service comes before leadership. This aspect is exclusive to servant leadership. Servant leadership is the only form of leadership that places service as its first priority. Because a servant leader serves first, we designated those characteristics of a servant as primary characteristics of servant leadership. In other words, servant leaders must first meet the criteria of a servant before they can meet the criteria of a servant leader, which is consistent with Greenleaf’s writing that put service before leadership (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002, p. 60).

Greenleaf (1997) wrote that a servant leader is to serve first and then by “conscious choice” (p. 13) aspire to lead.

The motivational element of servant leadership (i.e., to serve first) portrays a fundamental presupposition which distinguishes the concept from other leadership thoughts. This presupposition forms the mental model of the servant leader, that is the “I serve” as opposed to “I lead” mentality. The primary reason why leaders exist is to serve first, not to lead first. (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002, p. 60)

Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) went on to claim that “the servant leader operates on the assumption that ‘I am the leader, therefore I serve’ rather than ‘I am the leader, therefore I lead’” (p. 60); however, Sendjaya and Sarros missed the point that the servant leader must serve before leading. Their explanation is much more suitable for what Greenleaf called the leader first rather than the servant first who is a natural servant. For the servant first, it is not his or her leadership that leads him or her to serve but rather he or she serves and then makes a conscious decision to lead. De Pree (1992), former CEO of Herman Miller, gave the following example of service preceding leadership:

I arrived at the local tennis club just after the high school students had vacated the locker room. Like chickens, they had not bothered to pick up after themselves. Without thinking too much about it, I gathered up all their towels and put them in the hamper. A friend of mine quietly watched me do this and then asked me a question that I’ve pondered many times over the years. “Do you pick up towels because you’re the president of the company? Or are you the president because you pick up the towels?” (p. 218)

The servant leader’s answer should be, “I am the president because I pick up the towels.” De Pree responded by stating that picking up the towels (i.e., service) qualifies him to accept leadership (p. 219). Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) dissected De Pree’s example.

While both premises imply a linear relationship between the act of service and the position of the leader, they stand squarely opposite to each other in terms of cause and effect. The first premise “I serve because I am the leader” signifies the act of altruism. Both Jesus’ [*sic*] and Greenleaf’s delineation of servant leadership put the emphasis on the acts of service, as opposed to the act of leading. As the leader-teacher of his followers and disciples, Jesus deliberately declares to them, “I am among you as one who serves” (NIV Bible, Luke 22:27). Greenleaf (1977) posits that the servant leader “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first” (p. 13). At its core, the nature of the servant leadership is serving, not leading (De Pree, 1989). It is through the act of serving that the leaders lead other people to be what they are capable of becoming. (p. 60)

Primary characteristics of servant leadership are characteristics of being a servant. Some characteristics of servant leadership that could be identified as primary include altruism, empathy, humility, service, spirituality, and stewardship.

### **Purpose and Significance**

There is a lack of a clear definition of servant leadership. The purpose of this study was to more clearly define servant leadership by identifying primary characteristics. This study is unlike previous studies on the characteristics of servant leadership because the purpose was not to define new characteristics but to identify characteristics pertaining to service from the already existing list of characteristics identified in the literature. Greenleaf (1977) stated that servant leadership “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (p. 13). Greenleaf clearly stated that in servant leadership, service comes before leadership. Because a servant leader serves first, those characteristics pertaining to service are designated as the primary characteristics of a servant leader. In other words, servant leaders must first meet the criteria of a servant before they can meet the criteria of a servant leader.

### **Methodology**

The efforts made to more narrowly define Greenleaf’s (1977) definition of servant leadership have resulted in an even vaguer definition than the original. In this section, we explain how we identified primary characteristics of servant leadership through a Delphi study.

A Delphi study is a series of questionnaires distributed to a preselected group of experts in multiple iterations or rounds to collect data (Adler & Ziglio, 1996, p. 9; Hsu & Sandford, 2007, p. 1). Participants for this study were identified based on their scholarship in identifying characteristics of servant leadership as seen in their publication record (cf. Gordon, 1994, p. 6). The questionnaires sent to the participants were designed to elicit individual responses and to enable the scholars to refine their views in subsequent rounds as they compared their responses with the responses of the group coupled with controlled feedback (Adler & Ziglio, 1996, p. 9). In each round the participants anonymously completed the questionnaire provided. Once the questionnaires were returned, they were analyzed and the information used to prepare the next questionnaire. The new questionnaire coupled with controlled feedback was then sent to the participants (Gordon, 1994, p. 3; Ludwig, 1994, p. 55). This process continued until consensus

was reached (Skulmoski, Hartman, & Krahn, 2007, p. 2). Consensus for this study was defined as at least 70% of all participants rating individual characteristics with a 3 or higher on a 4-point Likert-type scale and with the median at 3.25 or higher (cf. Hsu & Sandford, 2007, p. 4). The philosophy of consensus building in the Delphi technique is that expert consensus is believed to more likely be accurate than an individual forecast (Gordon, 1994, p. 10).

Winston (2010) stated, “in-depth interviews and focus groups of critical incidents and phenomena might be helpful” (p. 183) in researching servant leadership. The risk of using focus groups is that the conversation may result in group think or be dominated by a limited number of people thereby not allowing everyone to participate (Winston, 2010, p. 185). The Delphi method is a good solution to these problems because participants acknowledge their peers’ opinions and must appreciate their peers’ responses in order to achieve consensus. Through anonymity, the Delphi technique encourages participants to express their opinion without fear of what others might think. All participants’ opinions are considered equal, and participants influence each other through their responses. The Delphi technique is the best way to identify primary characteristics of servant leadership because it can produce an expert consensus, which is appropriate for the current stage of the phenomenon.

## Results

In the first round of the Delphi study, 60 characteristics were identified by 10 participants. The number of characteristics was reduced to 27 by eliminating those characteristics that were only identified by one participant. During the second and third rounds, participants rated the 27 characteristics on a 4-point Likert scale. The Delphi study was concluded after the third round after consensus was reached on 12 items identified as primary characteristics of servant leadership. Kendall’s coefficient of concordance ( $W$ ) was found to be significant for the second,  $p < .05$ , at .249, and third rounds,  $p < .01$ , at .361. This shows that participants moved closer to consensus between rounds two and three. All 12 characteristics have means of at least 3.14 or higher, and all have modes of 4 (see Table 1). These items are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: *Primary Characteristics*

	Characteristic	Mean rank	Percentage rated 3 or 4	Mean	Median	Mode
1	Value people	21.07	100	4.00	4	4
2	Humility	20.07	100	3.86	4	4
3	Listening	19.93	100	3.86	4	4
4	Trust	18.93	100	3.71	4	4
5	Caring	18.29	100	3.71	4	4
6	Integrity	17.86	86	3.57	4	4
7	Service	17.07	71	3.43	4	4
8	Empowering	16.71	86	3.14	4	4
9	Serve others’ needs before their own	16.14	71	3.14	4	4
10	Collaboration	16.00	86	3.43	4	4

11	Love, unconditional love	15.71	86	3.29	4	4
12	Learning	15.64	71	3.29	4	4

The definitions provided for these characteristics by the participants of the study are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: *Primary Characteristics and Definitions*

	Characteristic	Explanation
1	Value people	Servant leaders truly value people for who they are, not just for what they give to the organization. Servant leaders are first and foremost committed to people, particularly their followers.
2	Humility	Servant leaders do not promote themselves, they promote others . . . putting others first. They are truly humble, not humble as an act. Servant leaders understand it is not about them—things happen through others; exemplary servant leaders know they cannot do it alone.
3	Listening	Listens receptively—nonjudgmentally. Are willing to listen because they truly want to learn from others; to understand follower/associates, they have to listen deeply. Seek first to understand. Like discernment enables one to know when or where service is needed.
4	Trust	Servant leaders give trust to others. They are willing to take risks to serve others well. Servant leaders are trusted because they are authentic and dependable.
5	Caring	Servant leaders truly have the people and the purpose in their heart in the people and the purpose. They display a kindness toward others and a concern for others. As the term implies, they are there to serve others and not to be served by others. Servant leaders care more for the people than for the organization.
6	Integrity	Servant leaders are honest, credible, and can be trusted. They don't cut corners, they allow dependability and trust—something you can count on. Integrity is knowing what your values are, developing a set of shared values with the people you serve, and then remaining true to those values. This provides clarity and drives commitment. Servant leaders need to be first in ensuring that their behaviors are consistent with their values and with the shared values they develop with others. This includes the categories of engaging in honest self-evaluation, inner consciousness, and spirituality.
7	Service	The servant leader is servant first.
8	Empowering	Servant leaders empower others and expect accountability.
9	Serve others' needs before their own	Servant leaders serve others before self. This is foundational to what it means to be a servant leader. Put others' interests before our own.

- 10 Collaboration    Servant leaders reject the need for competition and pitting people against each other. They bring people together. Because servant leadership is about pursuing a higher purpose for the good of the whole and because leadership is by definition a collaborative process (it requires collaboration between leaders and followers), skilled collaboration is an essential characteristic of a servant leader. This includes categories of accountability, awareness, building community, courage in relationships, empathy, and listening. Servant leaders do not go it alone; they work together with others in collaborative endeavors that serve the needs of followers and their organization.
- 11 Love, unconditional love    Unconditional love is a strong phrase with Christian overtones, so it might be better to call it something else, such as acceptance or appreciation, but it is a radical and powerful starting point for servant leadership because it becomes the primary motivator for the way you treat other people. If you start with a posture of unconditional love (believing that every person is as worthy and valuable as you are and committing to dealing with them in the most loving way possible in every circumstance), it transforms how you treat them and how you understand your higher purpose. This category includes acceptance, acknowledging, appreciation of others, equality, trust, and vulnerability. The ultimate motive to serve.
- 12 Learning    This includes learning from those below them in the organization. Servant leaders are learners. They truly want to learn from others. They know that they do not know it all so they are willing to learn from all directions in the organization. Great leaders never rest when it comes to learning about future trends and opportunities, the perspectives of their multiple internal and external stakeholders, the emergence of new ideas and technologies related to their business, and the art and science of leadership itself. Learning is the master skill that leads to growth, personally, relationally, organizationally, and in broader society. This includes comfort with ambiguity and intellectual energy and curiosity.
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### Valuing People

Valuing people was the only characteristic that all of the participants strongly agreed is a primary characteristic. In the first round, valuing people was only identified by two participants, but reached the highest level of consensus among the other characteristics by the end of the third round. Laub (1999), who also conducted a Delphi study, listed valuing people as the first of six characteristics defining servant leadership. He stated that valuing people means believing in them, serving others' needs before one's own, and listening (p. 83). Valuing people is also very similar to love and caring. One participant defined love as "the primary motivator for the way you treat other people," which is a definition that could very easily apply to valuing people or caring. Both valuing people and caring were defined by participants of the study as putting people before the organization. Despite the similarities between these characteristics as observed



by the participants, the participants rated them differently. As evident by the high level of consensus reached for this item in this study and its prominence in previous studies, valuing people is clearly a primary characteristic of servant leadership.

### **Humility**

This study identified humility as a primary characteristic of servant leadership with all of the participants either agreeing or strongly agreeing. In fact, all the participants strongly agreed except for one who merely agreed that humility was a primary characteristic. After the first round, humility was identified as a primary characteristic by 7 out of 10 participants, more than any other characteristic. By the end of the third round, humility achieved the second highest rating of consensus among the characteristics. One participant in this study stated that humility is “about serving others and gaining satisfaction from the service.” Likewise, Sendjaya (2008) stated that humility drives servant leaders (p. 410). Another participant in this study maintained that humility is “a prerequisite for serving others.”

In the literature, humility has been identified as critical to leadership styles other than servant leadership such as Collin’s (2001) Level Five Leadership (p. 36). Irving and Longbotham (2007) found humility to be a foundational dimension of servant leadership (p. 107). Sandage and Wiens (2001) argued that humility leads servant leaders to consider the needs of others above their own (p. 206). The high level of consensus in this study along with the overwhelming evidence in the literature clearly distinguishes humility as a primary aspect of servant leadership and applies to the service aspect of servant leadership.

### **Listening**

One hundred percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that listening is a primary characteristic. All the participants strongly agreed except for one who agreed. Listening was identified by five participants after the first round—the second highest behind humility. After the third round, it had the third highest level of consensus. The participants in this study stated, “to serve requires understanding others which needs listening.” In servant leadership, listening is a vital part of serving others.

Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) stated that listening helps all styles of effective leadership (p. 319). Larry Spears was quoted as saying that if leaders will listen first, this would be the “ultimate accomplishment in the discipline of servant leadership” (as cited in Senge, 1995, p. 229). Spears (1995) listed listening as the first of 10 critical characteristics of servant leadership (p. 4).

### **Trust**

One hundred percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that trust is a primary characteristic. All the participants strongly agreed except for two who agreed. Trust was identified by three participants in the first round. After the second round, trust and integrity were found to be very similar; however, they were not combined because they did not receive the same rating by all the participants. The two characteristics are identified separately in the literature. Russell and Stone (2002) differentiated between trust and integrity, stating that

“integrity reflects adherence to an overall moral code” (p. 148). Northouse (2007) stated that integrity inspires trust (p. 20).

In the literature, trust is essential to all forms of leadership (Covey, 1991, p. 170; Martin, 1998, p. 41; Maxwell, 1998, p. 58; Melrose, 1995) and especially to servant leadership (Farling et al., 1999, p. 60; Greenleaf, 1977, p. 25; Russell, 2000, p. 83; Russell & Stone, 2002, p. 148; Story, 2002). Patterson (2003) defined trust for servant leaders as “a belief in the unseen potential of the followers, believing they can accomplish goals” (p. 22). Such a definition highlights the service aspect of trust. One participant in this study stated, “without trust service will not happen.”

### **Caring**

One hundred percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that caring is a primary characteristic. In fact, all the participants strongly agreed except for two who agreed. Caring was identified by only two participants in the first round. One participant in this study defined caring as displaying “a kindness toward others and a concern for others.” Another participant stated, “servant leaders care more for the people than for the organization.” Dennis (2004) and Lopez (1995) both argued that servant leaders genuinely care for their followers. Crom (1998) stated that servant leaders should truly care about their team members as people, make them feel important, and show genuine interest in their lives (p. 6). Irving and Longbotham (2007) referred to this type of care as love. Although love and caring have been found to be very similar in the literature, they were not combined because participants in this study scored them differently. In order for servant leaders to serve others’ highest priority needs, they first need to care for them.

### **Integrity**

Eighty-six percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that integrity is a primary characteristic. Integrity was identified by three participants during the first round and was ranked sixth out of 27 according to mean rank after the second and third rounds. Integrity has been called an integral part of good leadership and considered to be one of the best qualities for “real leaders” (Russell & Stone, 2002, p. 148). It has been called the underlining principle of servant leadership (Hennessy et al., 1995, p. 167). De Pree (1992) referred to integrity as the “linchpin of leadership . . . lose integrity and a leader will suddenly find herself [*sic*] in a directionless organization going nowhere” (p. 220). In addition, De Pree listed integrity first on his list of 12 characteristics for becoming a successful servant leader (p. 220). In this study, one participant defined integrity as “knowing what your values are, developing a set of shared values with the people you serve, and then remaining true to those values.” Another participant in this study commented that “without integrity service means nothing.” In the literature, integrity is essential to leadership. The participants in this study took that definition a step further, stating that in servant leadership service is meaningless without integrity.

### **Service**

Seventy-one percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that service is a primary characteristic. Service was identified by three participants during the first round. It was rated second according to mean rank after the second round, but after the third round it was rated

seventh. It is not surprising that consensus was reached for service in a study whose purpose was to identify characteristics of servant leadership that apply to service. The only definition provided by the participants for service during this study was that “the servant-leader is servant first.” The definition for service in the literature is also lacking. Many observe that for the servant leader, serving comes first (De Pree, 1997; Farling et al., 1999, p. 64; Greenleaf, 1977; Patterson, 2003, p. 25; Russell & Stone, 2002, p. 149; Sendjaya, 2003, p. 4), but few attempt to actually explain or define the characteristic. The characteristic of service needs to be defined so that it can be differentiated from the more global construct of service represented by all 12 characteristics.

### **Empowering**

Eighty-six percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that empowering is a primary characteristic. Empowerment has been called the “central element in excellent leadership” (Russell, 2000, pp. 21, 84; Russell & Stone, 2002, p. 152). Others have called empowerment the most important characteristic of servant leadership (Patterson, 2003, p. 23). Greenleaf has even been referred to as the father of the empowerment movement (Buchen, 1998, p. 129). Without the sharing of power, there cannot be servant leadership. Patterson (2003) stated, “empowering people, with the best interest of those served in mind, is at the heart of servant leadership” (p. 23). Empowerment for the servant leader involves effective listening, making people feel significant, putting an emphasis on teamwork, valuing love and equality, entrusting workers with authority and responsibility, and allowing them to experiment and be creative without fear (Russell, 2000, p. 7; Russell & Stone, 2002, p. 7; Sendjaya, 2003, p. 4). Servant leaders empower their followers by serving them.

### **Serving Others’ Needs Before Their Own**

Seventy-one percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that serving others’ needs before their own is a primary characteristic. This is one of the most relevant characteristics to the service aspect of servant leadership. Laub (1999) argued that servant leaders value their people by serving other’s needs before their own. Although this characteristic shares similarities with service and valuing people, the participants in this study ranked them differently. Evident by the results of this study and previous studies, serving others’ needs before their own is clearly a primary characteristic of servant leadership.

### **Collaboration**

Eighty-six percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that collaboration is a primary characteristic. Collaboration was identified by three participants in the first round. Sendjaya (2003) maintained that collaboration means involving others in planning the actions that need to be taken (p. 4). Irving and Longbotham (2007) stated that the servant leader’s role of nurturing “a collaborative work environment is essential in effective team leadership” (p. 108). One participant in this study commented that collaboration in servant leadership is not concerned with “the good of the whole but the good of the follower(s).” Such a definition of collaboration clearly applies to the service aspect of servant leadership and therefore is considered to be a

primary characteristic as serving the highest priority needs of the followers is essential to Greenleaf's (1977) original definition.

### **Love/Unconditional Love**

Eighty-six percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that love is a primary characteristic. In the first round, two participants identified love as a primary characteristic and one listed unconditional love. These two characteristics were combined for the purposes of this study. Participants stated that "focusing on, valuing, and serving followers flows from love" and "love is at the peak of wanting to serve," affirming the results of this study that love/unconditional love is a primary characteristic to servant leadership. "Swindoll (1981) stated that servanthood and true love work hand in hand" (as cited in Dennis, 2004, p. 3). The results from this study and the literature agree that love and service are closely related.

### **Learning**

Seventy-one percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that learning is a primary characteristic. One of the participants commented that "great leaders never rest when it comes to learning." The participants in this study understood learning to require humility. They defined learning to include "learning from those below them in the organization." They wrote that servant leaders "know that they don't know it all so they are willing to learn from all directions in the organization." One participant stated that learning is "related to growth and modeling the way for others to grow and maximize potential." Therefore, by learning, the leader is serving his or her followers by showing them a way in which they can grow. Perhaps this is the idea that one participant had in mind when he defined learning as "an important goal for all involved in service."

Of the 12 primary characteristics identified by the group of servant leadership scholars that participated in this study, some may not seem to apply to service; however, after a closer examination of how these characteristics are defined and applied within the field of servant leadership, it is clear through the results of this study and the literature that they are primary characteristics of servant leadership.

### **Limitations**

The Delphi method is not without its limitations. Limitations that occurred during this study include the number of characteristics included in the study, combining similar characteristics, response rate, lack of clarity about the use of the term primary, and completeness.

**Number of characteristics included in the study.** It was decided to limit the number of characteristics identified in Round 1 by only including characteristics that were identified by more than one participant. This narrowed the number of characteristics to be used in the Round 2 questionnaire from 60 to 27. It is unlikely that participants would achieve consensus on 60 characteristics. Schmidt (1997) mentioned that researchers may make efforts to reduce the number of items if there are much more than 20 items (p. 769). It is possible that higher consensus and a higher response rate could have been achieved if fewer than 20 characteristics were listed in the study. We considered limiting the number of characteristics further by only

including those characteristics identified by more than two participants. This would have resulted with a list of only nine characteristics and would have not included important characteristics such as valuing people, which after Round 3 had the highest rating of consensus for being a primary characteristic as well as other characteristics that after three rounds were identified as primary characteristics: caring, empowering, learning and serving others' needs before their own.

**Combining similar characteristics.** One of the responsibilities of the researcher conducting a Delphi study is to combine similar characteristics after the first round (cf. Schmidt, 1997, p. 769). In this study, there were several characteristics that were similar such as valuing people, caring and love, and integrity and trust. However, it was difficult to combine these characteristics even when participants commented about their similarity because these same participants ranked these characteristics differently.

**Response rate.** The response rates for the three rounds of this study are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: *Number and Percentage of Responses for Each Round*

Round	Number sent	Number returned	Response rate
Round 1	36	10	28%
Round 2	11	8	73%
Round 3	8	7	88%

The Round 1 questionnaire was sent to 36 scholars, and only 10 returned the questionnaire thereby agreeing to participate in the study. There is no way of knowing what percentage of the identified scholars received the invitation and chose not to participate and what percentage, if any, did not receive the invitation at all. Only five identified scholars responded that they would not be able to participate in the study. Schmidt (1997) stated that a low response rate for the initial call for participants “might indicate that potential participants do not consider the ranking exercise relevant or important” (p. 772). Only one of the five participants who responded stated that he would not participate in the study because he does not “believe that there is any definitive list of servant-leadership characteristics” (personal communication, April 15, 2011). The other four explained that they would not be able to participate in the study because of busy schedules. The response rate for Rounds 2 and 3 was relatively high at 73% and 88%, respectively. Participants in these rounds indicated their interest in the study.

**Lack of clarity about the use of the term primary.** At the beginning of this study, some of the participants in this study seemed to misunderstand the use of the term “primary.” Primary, as used in this study, was clearly defined to refer to those characteristics that apply to service. It seems that some participants either did not understand this definition or chose to ignore it. One participant explained that he did not agree with the definition of primary used for this study to refer to characteristics of servant leadership applying to service and stated that he would identify characteristics according to his definition of primary. This participant did not continue after Round 1 as the definition of primary characteristics was made clearer in Rounds 2 and 3.

**Completeness.** Participants should be encouraged to fully complete the questionnaire by scoring every item. In this study, two participants failed to score all the items in both Round 2

and 3 questionnaires. Complete questionnaires are needed to calculate Kendall's W; therefore, the mode of the group's responses for the items not marked was used to fill in the blanks (cf. Dalkey & Helmer, 1963, p. 459).

Because participant selection is so critical to the results of a Delphi study, the first suggestion is that this study be repeated with a different group of scholars. Selecting scholars in servant leadership with a background or publishing record in service is suggested.

Participants in this study commented on the importance of identifying characteristics that are unique to servant leadership. If there are characteristics unique to servant leadership, they should be found within this list of primary characteristics. It is the service aspects of servant leadership that distinguish it from other leadership styles. Therefore, should a researcher want to continue with this line of study, he or she should ask participants with scholarship in service to identify characteristics unique to servant leadership from the 12 primary characteristics identified in this study.

### Conclusion

Over 100 characteristics of servant leadership have been identified in the literature (Sendjaya, 2003, p. 4). Efforts have been made to keep the definition of servant leadership ambiguous and therefore applicable to a wide audience (Polleys, 2002, p. 124). In his 2005 keynote address at the International Servant Leadership Conference, Peter Block addressed the conference attendees: "You've held on to the spirit of servant-leadership, you've kept it vague and undefinable. . . . People can come back every year to figure out what the hell it is" (p. 55).

This study has taken an important step to better define the concept of servant leadership. This was achieved not by adding new characteristics to the already vast list of characteristics of servant leadership but by identifying characteristics within that list that are primary to servant leadership—characteristics that are not merely more important, but characteristics that must manifest themselves before the other characteristics. Greenleaf (1977) stated that a servant leader must serve first and then make a conscious choice to aspire to lead. The characteristics that have been labeled as primary are characteristics that pertain to the service aspect of servant leadership.

Through this study, a group of scholars in servant leadership, who were selected based on their publication record of identifying characteristics of servant leadership, identified 12 primary characteristics. These characteristics include valuing people, humility, listening, trust, caring, integrity, service, empowering, serving others' needs before their own, collaboration, love/unconditional love, and learning. These characteristics must manifest themselves before any other characteristics because in order to serve first a servant leader must first exhibit these characteristics and then aspire to lead.

In addition, the identification of these 12 characteristics has practical applications for aspiring and established servant leaders. These characteristics can be used by potential servant leaders to make sure that they are serving first by fulfilling the primary characteristics of servant leadership before they aspire to lead. Established servant leaders can also use these characteristics to ensure that they are serving those whom they lead.

Identifying the primary characteristics of servant leadership will also help the academic community focus on the more important characteristics of servant leadership; that is, those characteristics that distinguish servant leadership from other leadership theories by describing the service aspect of servant leadership. Of the more than 100 characteristics of servant leadership identified in the literature, most relate to the leadership aspect of the phenomenon.

There is nothing wrong with characteristics of servant leadership that describe leadership aspects of the phenomenon as it is these characteristics that put the leadership in servant leadership; however, these characteristics do not differentiate servant leadership from other leadership theories. Only the primary characteristics of servant leadership—that is, those that apply to service—can distinguish servant leadership from other leadership theories.

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