



## Servant Leadership: How Has it Shaped the Last 20 Years and Where is it Going?

---

Dr. Joycelynn Green

*Regent University School of Business and Leadership*

*Roundtable: Servant Leadership Roundtable*

### Abstract

This article provides a synopsis of the history of servant leadership and its revolution within the past two decades and decades to come. The idea of leadership is rooted in ancient philosophical and religious traditions (Aldulaimi, 2019). Conversely, the concept was popularized in the 20th century by Robert K. Greenleaf, who explored and promoted this leadership philosophy through his writings and lectures. The idea of servant leadership is conceived in the biblical teachings where the Messiah pioneered servant leadership as the perfect way to lead the followers. According to Qiu and Dooley (2019), in ancient times, the idea of servant leadership was traced to ancient China when the Confucian philosophy was established. Nevertheless, in the ancient world other regions also promoted servant leadership as in Greece, for example, when Socrates and Plato described leaders as those dedicated to their communities' well-being. However, these ancient views take a decontextualized approach to leadership that does not focus on using power but on gaining influence through serving. This article highlights the historical background of servant leadership, its key characteristics with measurement tools, and the findings of relevant studies conducted over the last 20 years. In the study conceptual model, servant leaders use their motivation to lead with a need to serve and display servant leadership. Personal characteristics and culture are positioned alongside the motivational dimension. Servant leadership is established through the empowerment and development of people. Nonetheless, servant leadership has significantly transformed in the last 20 years.

Keywords: servant leadership, leadership, followers

---

Servant Leadership is ancient, but Robert K. Greenleaf is the first person who articulated it in our time. Despite being over five decades old, servant leadership was projected to become the new field of research among leadership scholars after Greenleaf's articulation. Because it is so effective, servant leadership continues to

---

2023 Regent Research Roundtables Proceedings pp. 384-391.

© 2023 Regent University School of Business & Leadership

ISSN 2993-589X

generate significant interest. Data has demonstrated that servant-led organizations are more inclined to perform better than opponents, sustain personnel, and cultivate the next generation of leaders than businesses that operate out of more conventional command-and-control leadership styles. Greenleaf (1970) proposed a new leadership style, and the essential tools for a servant-leader included listening, persuasion, access to intuition and foresight, use of language, and pragmatic outcomes measurements. As argued by Greenleaf, the theory encourages the moral, emotional, and relational dimensions of leadership. Hence, this article argues that the concept is actualized through humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship to offer direction to followers. The study findings point to a high-quality dyadic relationship cemented by trust and fairness as the most important mediating process to encourage self-actualization, positive job attitudes, performance, and a more robust organizational focus on sustainability and corporate social responsibility. In this article, I will establish that servant leadership has attained and continues to achieve much-desired results.

Further, it is my position that servant leadership has its backing in the Bible, which impacts modern understanding of the Bible. The modern approach to servant leadership is aligned with the Bible's teachings using the outstanding leadership demonstrated by biblical characters. These characters will also be aligned with modern players who have used the biblical leadership perspective. The article will discuss characters such as Robert K. Greenleaf, Mother Teresa, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Howard Schultz, and Satya Nadella, allowing me to demonstrate how these leaders achieved outstanding results through past, present, and future servant leadership. In line with the biblical teachings of leadership, this article is meant to ascertain the Bible's authority and as a perfect reference to servant leadership.

### **Robert K. Greenleaf**

Robert K. Greenleaf laid the foundation known as servant leadership. Caponigro (2020) stated that Greenleaf pioneered modern servant leadership in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his essay titled *Servant Leadership*, published in 1970, Robert K. Greenleaf described a servant leader as someone who puts focus on the needs of others and helps them grow and develop. Further, Greenleaf (1977) expanded the concept by outlining the characteristics of a servant leader as a person who practices empathy, humility, and a commitment to serve others rather than seeking power or control.

Further, Langhof and Guldenberg (2020) observed that Greenleaf developed a servant leadership theory that resonated with many individuals and organizations in various practice areas, such as social work and non-profit sectors. Since the inception of Greenleaf's servant leadership concept in 1970, many leadership practitioners have developed and embraced it—especially within the last few decades. The outline provided by Greenleaf has led to many entities incorporating servant-leadership concepts and principles into their management and leadership practices. According to

---

2023 Regent Research Roundtables Proceedings pp. 384-391.

© 2023 Regent University School of Business & Leadership

ISSN 2993-589X

Zhou, Gul, and Tufail (2022), the approach has resulted in more employee engagement, trust, and organizational performance. Consequently, servant leadership has gained relevance and influence in leadership philosophy in the 21st century. Its principles align well with values-based and ethical leadership approaches that focus on serving the greater good and empowering people within organizations, which will continue to foster and grow with each generation.

### **Mother Teresa**

A study by Canavesi and Minelli (2021), focusing on Mother Teresa, noted that servant leadership is central to followers' growth and the achievement of their fullest potential and capability. Personal growth and development are vital in promoting maturity, success, prosperity, and happiness. In servant leadership, these elements become the primary focus as leaders aim to improve and maintain the followers' well-being. Hence, a leader must observe certain principles to attain servant leadership, including delegating responsibilities, demonstrating selflessness, prioritizing followers, and committing to help individuals develop and perform optimally. According to Kumari et al. (2022), this promotes mental and emotional strength and motivates individuals to trust highly. Therefore, a servant leader acknowledges other people's perspectives and gives them the support they need to meet their goals. A servant leader can effectively offer guidance and influence followers' growth by involving them in decisions and building community. In the Bible, servant leadership is demonstrated using the example of John the Baptist, among others who see themselves as a "friend of the bridegroom." Further, 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 describes a true leader as a person who stewards the role he has received as best he can and gladly leaves the role assignments to God. Therefore, he does not take himself higher than others and does not preoccupy himself with personal gains.

### **Abraham Lincoln**

According to Benmira and Agboola (2021), Abraham Lincoln is among the world's most regarded servant leaders. Lincoln's leadership style and approach to governing followed the philosophy of servant leadership that focused on serving the people and meeting the needs of their followers. Benmira and Agboola endeavored to describe Lincoln concerning the desirable characteristics of a servant leader. Their study described how Lincoln was able to end the slave trade as he focused on the need for self-reliance. The idea earned him many enemies, including the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, whom he described as a person who never meant to help the people. Lincoln was more focused on the benefits of his followers rather than himself. Benmira and Agboola described Lincoln as a person who was extremely dedicated and determined to serve the people. In one case, he used all earnings available to distract and discredit his detractors to ensure a free and fair society. Unlike his predecessors, Jabarkhail (2020) noted that Lincoln never intended to benefit himself

but the people. It is uncommon for many influential people to risk losing their positions at the expense of the people. Therefore, history adequately decorates Lincoln as a faithful servant leader through his empathy and engagement with the people.

### **Nelson Mandela**

Nelson Mandela was the first black South African president. He led the nation from 1994 to 1999 but remained a leader until his death. However, his influence as a leader transcended before the last decades. He fought for the country's independence, and once it gained independence, he served for only 5 years and retired.

A study by Blanchard and Broadwell (2021) adequately describes the leadership style of Nelson Mandela as servant leadership and a model who inspires many to date. Mandela's leadership is usually referred to when addressing the challenge of leadership in Africa. Blanchard and Broadwell relied on secondary data to support their argument and used content to analyze it. In the findings, Nelson Mandela is depicted as a selfless humanist leader who led a revolution and stood for the benefit of the people. In this case, he advocated for equality, peace, justice, and freedom. Because Mandela fought and suffered from oppression his entire life, he was not hungry for power and insisted on being in office for no more than 4 years. Blanchard and Broadwell also noted that his approach was uncommon among many African leaders, as he emphasized determination, forgiveness, and reconciliation. These ideas demonstrated the true spirit of servant leadership in Africa. His approach undoubtedly proved he was a leader of excellence in Africa. Consequently, leaders today are urged to emulate his approach to leadership to resolve the on-going leadership crises in Africa. The articulation of servant leadership urges African leaders to promote their leadership style, which can end the crisis of leadership that produces underdevelopment.

### **Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**

According to Otieno (2020), Ellen Johnson Sirleaf served as the Liberian president from 2006 to 2018. She was the first woman to be elected president in Africa. She focused on rebuilding the nation after two civil wars and promoted economic development. Having undergone more than two decades of civil war, Liberia had witnessed severe impoverishment and destruction of lives and property. The war wiped out the achievements gained in the previous 25 years.

Additionally, society became militarized, and guerrilla warfare became predominant. Sirleaf was challenged further by the fact that the country had a male-dominated culture, which had decimated all women's institutional capacity. The effects of the war continued to cause bitterness that may live long in the minds of many Liberians. Sirleaf was a key participant and shaper in the movement in the 2000s from the Global South, particularly Africa, to place women's rights on the international human rights agenda

(Scully, 2016). She demonstrated a lack of fear and a determination to achieve what was a vicious and dangerous century. Sirleaf consistently showed her commitment to the people and observed high integrity while dealing with public resources. By promoting transparency and accountability in governance, she focused on governance and actively fought against corruption to restore trust in the government.

Moreover, Anagwo (2016) described her as a president who ensured inclusivity and empowerment. She advocated for gender equality and women's rights, aiming to create a more inclusive and equal society. Sirleaf achieved this through sacrifice and selflessness for the country and made tough decisions and sacrifices for the greater good of Liberia. Sirleaf was a transformational visionary, which helped her rebuild infrastructure, improve education, and attract foreign investment to spur economic growth and development. Among the best attributes of Sirleaf as a servant leader are compassion and empathy toward the people of Liberia. The attribute was well-pronounced during the Ebola crisis as she demonstrated a hands-on approach to addressing the challenges faced by her nation, exemplifying her servant leadership qualities.

### **Howard Schultz**

Howard Schultz is among the most prominent American servant leaders of 2000. According to Kumar, et al. (2020), Schultz is best known as the leader who transformed Starbucks into a popular coffeehouse chain. Their study observed that Shultz played a significant role in Starbuck's transformation and rise to global status. In the study, Schultz embarked on promoting corporate social responsibility. In this case, he prioritized the well-being and development of his employees. Therefore, he created a positive work environment and introduced competitive benefits and opportunities for career growth within the company. As the chairman, Schultz emphasized giving back to the communities. Hence, he started supporting various social and environmental causes in areas where Starbucks operated. Additionally, Schultz established an environment where ethical principles became a norm, and this promoted sustainable practices in the company's operations.

### **Satya Nadella**

Satya Nadella has served as Microsoft CEO since 2014. According to a study by de Araujo et al. (2021), Nadella transformed the company's culture and emphasized the importance of empathy and customer-centricity. In his focus, he was determined to offer products and services that met users' needs. A study by Lavazza and Farina (2020) described servant leaders as pioneers, and democratic rule is an option and exists when a person is willing to take up the responsibility. Emphasizing responsibility makes an individual. The burden of responsibility allows people to accomplish what they are determined to achieve, mirrored by Nadella. Practical relationship-building abilities are

imperative to leaders to make the best pioneers. Despite the availability of much research on this topic, many leaders fail to conceptualize the essence and pretend to be exceptionally functional but instead wind up being unreasonable towards social relations. However, Nadella's path focused on social relations with the customers and employees, which made him exceptional. However, if a leader fails to have a broad vision, the followers are disappointed with the leadership. With his foundation in servant leadership, Nadella has shaped the company's growth and maintained a solid market base.

## Conclusion

The above information touches on the perseverance effect of servant leadership. Even though this article has highlighted a few great leaders who have supported the concept of servant leadership, the number of servant leaders is vast. However, there are notable patterns associated with the style of servant leadership. Significant success has been characteristic of these leaders in the abovementioned examples. Further, these leaders have challenged the odds in leadership to become notable figures in society. Therefore, the remarkable effects of the approach leave trails of success and benefit individuals, which is the utmost intention of leadership. This study has also justified the biblical approach to servant leadership. Using the example of Jesus Christ and John the Baptist, these two great leaders showed and taught servant leadership. In this case, modern leaders have also been able to emulate their examples, enabling them to achieve great things and positively transform many lives. Servant leadership is continuously creating blueprints for generations to come, and it is also the ideal approach, with its most extraordinary support found in the Bible. It is practically proven possible and desirable with servant leaders – past, present, and future – that servant leadership will continue to modernize within the next 20 years and beyond.

---

### About the Author

With over 15 years of experience within the mental health and healthcare sectors under her belt, Joycelynn Green decided to use her voice for the voiceless. As a psychotherapist, she aims to reach individuals who lack the means of cognitive communication to comprehend the basic needs for medical and mental health stability. Recognizing that trauma, mental health, and healthcare sound and look different for everyone, her objective is to create a bridge where bias and miscommunication can be better translated. Joycelynn often speaks at local non-profits and licensed mental health organizations regarding the fine line between a mental health crisis and mental health stability, reminding everyone that we are walking a thin line and asking if we know where to go if the line starts to zig-zag.

Joycelynn's academic credentials include a doctorate from Regent University School of Business and Leadership and a master's degree in government, healthcare policy, and

---

2023 Regent Research Roundtables Proceedings pp. 384-391.

© 2023 Regent University School of Business & Leadership

ISSN 2993-589X

ethics. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies from Norfolk State University and several licenses and certifications in pharmacy, mental health, and healthcare administration. Her most recent endeavor includes the creation of The Rose Orchard and Cohesion Community Development Organization, where she will merge housing and mental health stability and hopes to be fully operational by mid-2024.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: 10541 Jefferson Ave, Newport News, VA 23601. Email: jgreenx6@aol.com

---

## References

- Aldulaimi, S. H. (2019). Leadership concept and constructs in Arabic philosophy. *Journal of Economic Cooperation & Development*, 40(2).
- Anagwo, E. C. (2016). Liturgical leadership as Christ's brand: A challenge to leadership in Africa. *Grace and Truth: A Journal of Catholic Reflections for Southern Africa*, 33(3), 65–80.
- Benmira, S., & Agboola, M. (2021, January). Evolution of leadership theory. *BMJ Leader*, 5, 3–5. <https://doi.org/10.1136/leader-2020-000296>
- Blanchard, K., & Broadwell, R. (2021). *Servant leadership in action: How you can achieve great relationships and results*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Canavesi, A., & Minelli, E. (2021). Servant leadership and employee engagement: A qualitative study. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 34(4), 413–435.
- Caponigro, P. W. (2020). Servant leadership and the contemporary emergency manager in a multisector collaborative organization [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University]. Walden University ScholarWorks. <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/8443/>
- de Araujo, L. M., Priadana, S., Paramarta, V., & Sunarsi, D. (2021). Digital leadership in business organizations. *International Journal of Educational Administration, Management, and Leadership*, 45–56.
- Eragula, R. (2015). The eminence of socially inclined leadership. *International Journal of Management & Business Studies*, 7(1), 2231–2463.
- Garba, D., & Akuva, I. I. (2020, June). The leadership styles of Nelson Mandela as a pattern for African leaders. *Covenant University Journal of Politics and International Affairs*, 8(1).
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1970). *The servant as leader*. Robert K. Greenleaf Publishing Center.
- 

2023 Regent Research Roundtables Proceedings pp. 384-391.

© 2023 Regent University School of Business & Leadership

ISSN 2993-589X

- Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Paulist Press.
- Jabarkhail, S. (2020). Servant leadership in the context of mosque: A qualitative case study of Muslim women's perspectives. *Administrative Sciences, 10*(3), 72.
- Kumar, N., Bhardwaj, S., & Chu, S. E. (2020, June). Starbucks in China: An undisputed leader? *Asian Management Insights, 7*(1), 34–41.
- Kumari, K., Abbas, J., Hwang, J., & Cioca, L. I. (2022). Does servant leadership promote emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behavior among employees? A structural analysis. *Sustainability, 14*(9), 5231.
- Langhof, J. G., & Guldenberg, S. (2020). Servant Leadership: A systematic literature review – toward a model of antecedents and outcomes. *German Journal of Human Resource Management, 34*(1), 32–68.
- Lavazza, A., & Farina, M. (2020). The role of experts in the Covid-19 pandemic and the limits of their epistemic authority in democracy. *Frontiers in Public Health, 8*, 356.
- Otieno, A. (2020). Peace profile: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. *Peace Review, 32*(4), 554–563.
- Qiu, S., & Dooley, L. (2019). Servant leadership: Development and validation of a multidimensional measure in the Chinese hospitality industry. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 40*(2), 193–212.
- Scully, P. (2016). *Ellen Johnson Sirleaf*. Ohio University Press.
- Zhou, G., Gul, R., & Tufail, M. (2022, July). Does servant leadership stimulate work engagement? The moderating role of trust in the leader. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.925732>