



## Why Servant Leadership?

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### **Abstract**

*Servant leadership is a global leadership approach. Whether you live in South Africa, the Middle-East, China, or the United States, many integrate servant leadership within their culture. One may think servant leadership is not as prevalent and possibly even counter-cultural; however, one is able to identify aspects of servant leadership within many major businesses, cultures, and religions today. The top three religions across the globe include Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, and all of these promote servanthood among their constituents for the betterment of humanity and oneself. Religious or not, serving others elevates those around above oneself, and through this the leader is able to empower others. They empower others through their actions to think past themselves, to think about others and the whole of the organization, which ultimately makes a greater impact as everyone comes together to serve people and the organization with a purpose.*

*Why servant leadership? Why should a leader decide to serve and moreover be a servant leader? This leadership approach has been studied and developed by numerous people, but it all started with Robert Greenleaf. Greenleaf (2002) discusses in depth about servant leadership and how the servant leader is a servant first, compared to a leader first. Every nation and every culture has leaders, is it possible for the same to be true about servant leaders? This type of leadership may not be the easiest to follow, but is it worth the reward? The following essay will delve into what servant leadership is, the servant-first compared to the leader-first attitude, the global and religious perspective, and add perspective to the question, Why Servant Leadership?*

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Servant-First

Greenleaf posed the question, what if the servant and the leader could be fused together into a real person (2002)? Since then many researchers have attempted to continue to answer this question. Greenleaf (2002) wrote, “The servant-leader *is* servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (p. 13). Northouse (2013) also asks similar questions, “Servant Leadership is a paradox – an approach to leadership that runs counter to common sense. Our everyday images of leadership do not coincide with leaders being servants. Leaders influence, and servants follow. How can leadership be both service *and* influence? How can a person be a leader *and* a servant at the same time” (p. 219)?

Just as Greenleaf emphasizes the need for servant leaders, leaders who are servants first, many have taken this stance and developed it in how to practically apply it today. According to Spears and Lawrence (2002), there are ten characteristics that are essential in developing servant leaders, which include the following: (1) Listening, paying attention to what is and what is not being said—having a “deep commitment to listening intently to others” (p. 5). (2) Empathy, “strives to understand and empathize with others” (p. 5). (3) Healing, realizing the servant leader is able to be part of other’s healing processes by assisting in mending broken hearts and spirits. (4) Awareness, self-awareness is critical as a leader; a leader must be aware of their own values and ethics to be able to lead others. (5) Persuasion, the servant leader desires to lead through his or her influence, compared to relying on the title one is given. (6) Conceptualization, servant leaders should be visionaries! The ideal for this type of leader is to be able to conceptualize broader thinking, past the normal, everyday realities. (7) Foresight, “Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future” (Spears & Lawrence, 2002, p. 7). (8) Stewardship, servant leaders should be stewards in accordance with Marsiglia’s (2009) definition, “Stewardship is the behavior of responsibly managing another person or organization’s assets that have been entrusted to one’s care” (p. 4). (9) Commitment to the growth of people, servant leaders believe in the value of each individual person and are therefore committed to the development of those people. (10) Building community, “All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his own unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 53). Spears and Lawrence recognized that the characteristics they identified are not exhaustive, and therefore the preceding will be compared to other research developed on servant leadership characteristics.

Patterson (2003) developed a model of servant leadership based on values, where she recognized seven constructs that mold and shape the virtues and behaviors of servant leaders (Northouse, 2013). According to Patterson (2003), “Servant leadership encompasses seven virtuous constructs, which work in a processional pattern. These constructs are (a) agapao love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, and (g) service” (p. 2). The first of these constructs is agapao love, which according to Winston and Ryan (2008), “This Greek word refers to a moral love, doing the

right thing at the right time for the right reason” (p. 5). The next construct is humility, which is often misunderstood. An individual may associate a humble person with one who is quiet, shy, or weak, but this is not what humility ought to be viewed as. Humility is essentially having good self-awareness; keeping one’s strengths and weaknesses in perspective, while not being overly self-focused but rather others-focused (Patterson, 2003). Next, altruism, according to Kaplan (as cited by Patterson), altruism is “helping others just for the sake of helping” (p. 4). Additionally, the aspect of vision is quite similar to the above characteristic of conceptualization (by Spears). Where does the leader see the organization and each individual person going? What vision does he or she have for them and how can the leader inspire their followers to reach that place? The next construct, trust, is essential for every leader, not only that, but for every relationship. Relationships and respect are built on trust, and for an organization, team, or any type of group to develop and grow; it is essential to build a foundation of trust. Next, empowerment, this construct is key to being an effective servant leader. Just as this question was previously asked in reference to vision (which connects to this point), *what vision does he or she have for them and how can the leader inspire their followers to reach that place?* No action or follow-through would take place in an others focused leadership approach if there were no empowerment! The last construct described here is service, which is indeed based on Greenleaf’s writings describing a need for leaders who are servants first. Patterson concludes her article with reflections on Greenleaf as she states, “Perhaps Greenleaf put it best when he stated the great leader is servant first and that this is the key to greatness. As the pursuit of understanding and investigation into servant leadership goes forth we must remember Greenleaf’s admonition, ‘able servants with potential to lead will lead, and where appropriate, they will follow only servant leaders. Not much else counts if this does not happen’” (p. 7).

Others have developed lists of what they have concluded to be attributes of servant leadership. Russell and Stone (2002) identified nine attributes they believe to be repetitive among many findings on servant leadership, which they entitle *functional attributes*. The functional attributes they list are as follows: vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment (Russell & Stone, 2002). According to their research these attributes are all distinct, yet related, and they are key characteristics of effective servant leaders.

**Table 1**

| <b>Spears</b>   | <b>Patterson</b>   | <b>Russell &amp; Stone</b>  |
|---|--|---|
| Characteristics   | Virtuous Constructs  | Functional Attributes   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Healing</li> <li>• Awareness</li> <li>• Persuasion</li> <li>• Conceptualization</li> <li>• Foresight</li> <li>• Stewardship</li> <li>• Commitment to growth of people</li> <li>• Building community</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agapao love</li> <li>• Humility</li> <li>• Altruism</li> <li>• Vision</li> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Empowerment</li> <li>• Service</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vision</li> <li>• Honesty</li> <li>• Integrity</li> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Service</li> <li>• Modeling</li> <li>• Pioneering</li> <li>• Appreciation of others</li> <li>• Empowerment</li> </ul> |

One is able to identify a pattern among the comparisons shown in Table 1 above from the findings of three credible sources on servant leadership. The wording may be slightly different, but the focus is the same, which all started with Greenleaf and an out-of-the-ordinary concept of leadership. A main component of servant leadership is obviously service, however various peoples and cultures may view servanthood differently. Are the above characteristics ones that would be difficult to integrate in varying cultures other than the typical Western perspective, or is this leadership approach able to be practiced globally, transcending culture with the possibility to bring peoples together?

Greenleaf (2002) acknowledges servant leadership may not be the most popular or widely used approach to leadership, “My thesis, that more servants should emerge as leaders, or should follow only servant-leaders, is not a popular one. It is much more comfortable to go with a less demanding point of view about what is expected of one now. There are several undemanding, plausibly-argued alternatives to choose” (p.10). In the world today there are many leadership approaches that are less demanding and even comfortable to the average leader. So why should a leader choose servant leadership?

Greenleaf said, “The servant leader is servant first...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature” (2002). If one would allow for a slightly exaggerated example, the mindset of leader-first mentality versus a follower-first mentality is similar to a situation with a certain left-handed CEO of a long-standing scissor producing company. This CEO was, as previously stated, left-handed, as well as the COO, and the chairman of the board of this company. This CEO determined that the leadership of the company was more important than the employees and the vast majority of their current customer base, they decided to only make left-handed scissors. Yes, this company had employees, and they had customers, but on whom were they focusing? In the same way the leader-first perspective leader will have followers, and possibly even followers that state he or she is a great leader. However, with a follower-first perspective leader, not only will this leader often have followers, but those followers will believe in their leader and believe in

themselves. With the majority of companies consisting of followers, putting their needs first, and ultimately inspiring them to work to the level in which their leaders believe they are able, will increase their buy-in to the leader, company, and ultimately the vision of the organization (Brooks, 2015)!

Similarly, some leaders today want employees to think Servant Leadership is not common or is not typical in one's culture. In contrast, it is not counter-cultural in the sense of the follower. The follower today is the majority— more followers than leaders, employees than CEOs, and amateurs than experts. Those followers, employees, and amateurs desire to be developed, to learn and grow. How are these groups of people able to continue to stand on the shoulders of those that have come before them? The answer is by having those leaders, CEOs, and experts offering their shoulders! Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943), which delves into meeting people's needs to motivate them, addresses this need that many people are desiring. Maslow studied higher and lower level needs. These needs build upon one another, and the highest of these levels he classified is entitled, "Self-Actualization Needs." "The highest need category, self-actualization, represents the need for self-fulfillment: developing one's full potential, increasing one's competence, and becoming a better person. Self-actualization needs can be met in the organization by providing people with opportunities to grow, be empowered and creative, and acquire training for challenging assignments and advancement" (Daft, 2017, p. 234). Self-actualization, according to Maslow's theory, is the highest level of need in employees today. Although the lower needs must be met first, for example meeting basic needs such as paying one's bills and safety in the workplace, if the higher needs are met, the individual is not only more likely to stay in that organization longer, they have more passion and drive to produce results for that team and organization. According to the *Academy of Management Journal*, "When managers put their employees' needs over their own, business gain improved customer happiness, increased job performance from staff members and low turnover" (Brooks, 2015). How do superiors do this? By putting others' needs ahead of their own and showing this in practical, tangible ways that are communicated to all of those around them; they want to know their superiors value them, which brings out the best in the employees.

## **CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE**

As stated previously, often servant leadership is understood to be a Western concept. Many studies have been conducted comparing this approach to leadership in different cultures, and some are directly in comparison to the Western worldview. Although servant leadership still has a greater influence in the United States, it is growing around the world today (Merino, 2016). In Merino's (2016) research, he compared the United States and Latin America on their view and practice of servant leadership, he wrote, "Servant leadership is a style that is getting more attention due to the benefits that it provides in a community or organization. Having the knowledge of cultural differences and how cultural dimensions affect the personality and behavior of people in this context, it is crucial in

understanding the differences of leadership styles presented in the two groups studied” (p. 27). In addition to his study on Latin America, such studies as the one conducted by Han, Kakabadse, and Kakabadse (2010), identified servant leadership not only in the Western culture, but also from the perspective of the Chinese culture and how this leadership style would be applied through their cultural lens, conducted through research and an inductive study.

Another study of a non-Western culture and their perspective of servanthood and its relationship to leadership was conducted by Bekker (2008), on a social practice entitled *Ubuntu*.

“The South African Venda saying, ‘Muthu u bebelwa munwe – A person is born for the other,’ captures the spirit of this approach of interdependence between self and community. This is more than mere interdependence as the identity of the self is defined in finding the other in community. By entering into honest dialogue and taking steps to relocate the self in mutuality with the other, the self is also enriched and formed” (p. 19).

According to Ubuntu, one’s life is not about self, but about the betterment of the community. If one’s lifestyle includes the belief that ‘a person is born for the other,’ then one’s lifestyle is for the whole and not the individual, with the mindset of the leader encouraging, leading, and serving those above, around, and under him or her.

## **RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE**

What is it about servant leadership that draws people from various backgrounds, cultures, classes, and socio-economic strata? Religions across the globe speak about servanthood as an important concept.

*“Without selfless service are not objectives fulfilled; in service lies the purest action”* (Adi Granth | Sikh Sacred Scripture, 2015, p. 992) (Sikhism).

Why are servanthood and selfless acts so highly esteemed among various religious perspectives?

*“Every selfless act, Arjuna, is born from the eternal, infinite Godhead. God is present in every act of service. All life turns on this law, O Arjuna. Whoever violates it, indulging his senses for his own pleasure and ignoring the needs of others, has wasted his life”* (Eknath, 1985, Bhagavad Gita 3.15-18) (Hinduism).

The concept of being lowly to experience great gain is more commonly believed than one might think.

*“By holding myself in high esteem I shall find myself in unpleasant realms, ugly and stupid; But should this [attitude] be shifted to others I shall acquire honors in a joyful realm. If I employ others for my own purposes I myself shall experience servitude, but if I use myself for the sake of others I shall experience lordliness”* (Shantideva, 2008, 8.126-128) (Buddhism).

Not only do various religions hold servanthood in high esteem, some even command that their constituents be a “servant” and a “slave of all.”

*“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all”* (Mark 10:43-44, New English Standard Version) (Christianity).

Some may believe servant leadership is primarily from a Western mindset (Winston & Ryan, 2008), but actually various cultures have their own form of servant leadership that is often integrated within their belief system. According to Covey as written in *Servant Leadership* by Greenleaf (2002),

*“That one quality is the difference between leadership that works and leadership—like servant leadership—that endures. There is a mass of evidence that shows that this moral sense, this conscious, this inner light, is a universal phenomenon. This spiritual or moral nature of people is also independent of religion or of any particular religious approach, culture, geography, nationality, or race. Yet all of the enduring major religious traditions of the world are unified when it comes to certain basic underlying principles or values”* (Forward).

In discussing unifying principles or values of the major religious traditions today, one of the notable areas is of servanthood. This principle can be found within the three major religions of the world, which include the following: Hinduism with 15 percent, Islam with 23 percent, and Christianity with 32 percent of the world’s population (Harper, 2012). Strong havens of these three religions encompass areas across the world, representing every majorly populated continent.

## **Hinduism**

The first religion to be considered herein is Hinduism, where most of the world’s adherents are found in India (Friedman, 2011). According to their Scriptures, the *Bhagavad Gita* (Eknath, 1985) states, “Strive continually to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work one attains the supreme goal of life. Do your work with the welfare of others in mind” (3:19-20). Additionally, Payal Argarwal (2005) writes in the *Hindu Times* about leadership. He gives several recommendations in finding the balance between a strict-overbearing leader and a laissez-faire leader. Some of these points include the following:

- “Step out of your Ivory Tower and adopt an open-door policy to facilitate free communication, trust and co-operation with the staff. Be willing to pitch in and not just observe from the sidelines.
- Promote an esprit de corps atmosphere by stimulating participation and collaboration amongst your subordinates. Be more sensitive to their needs. You can bond with them only when you show that you care.
- Concentrate on building a group of caring, happy, cautious, alert and well-trained employees. Your job is to keep their morale high and keep them brimming with enthusiasm.”

Putting others’ needs first, being sensitive to the needs of your followers, building and caring for the group are all aspects that align with the servant leadership approach. As highlighted in the introduction, the Hindu scripture states,

*“Every selfless act, Arjuna, is born from the eternal, infinite Godhead. God is present in every act of service. All life turns on this law, O Arjuna. Whoever violates it, indulging his senses for his own pleasure and ignoring the needs of others, has wasted his life”* (Eknath, 1985, Bhagavad Gita 3.15-18).

Then, according to Hinduism, each Hindu should perform acts of service, acting for the needs of others in order to avoid a wasted life.

## **Islam**

The second largest religion in the world is Islam. Approximately 1.226 billion Muslims live around the world (Grigonis, 2014), on every continent, the top two being the Middle East, and Asia-Pacific (Desilver & Masci, 2017). Their sacred book is entitled the Quran, upon which they base their belief system. Al Quran 29:70 says, “And as for those who strive in Our path — We will surely guide them in Our ways. And Indeed, Allah is with those who are of service to others.” Also, many researchers have conducted studies on the relationship between Islam and servant leadership. According to Gonaim’s (2016) research, he believed there is a link between servant leadership and the pattern of their prophet’s leadership. He writes, “The findings indicate that the Prophet’s pattern of leadership correspond to servant-leadership characteristics. His style of caring and serving has influenced his people in striving to be educated and enjoy well-being” (Gonaim, 2016, p. 58). Moreover, Khan, Khan, and Chaudhry (2015), also concluded from their study that “all the fundamental facets of servant leadership are well covered and taught by Islam” (p. 1612). Leadership in Islam focuses on doing good for others for the sake of Allah. To them it is an honor to lead their fellow Muslims and humankind. With this responsibility they endeavor to “guide, protect and treat their followers justly” (Mahazan, Azdi, Aishah, Yuseri, Rosmizi, Yusuf, & Rumaizuddin, 2015, p. 723).



## Christianity

The largest religion in the world today is Christianity, comprising 33 percent of the world's population (Harper, 2012). This religion's sacred book is entitled the Holy Bible, which is the base of all the beliefs and it highly supports servant leadership. Philippians 2:3-8 (ESV) says,

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Just as Jesus Christ (who is one Person of the Christian God-head) took on the form of a servant, He came to the earth to serve (Mark 10:45), and He commands those who follow Him (Christians) to serve others (Mark 10:43-44). According to Sanders (2007), “Jesus was a revolutionary, not in the guerrilla warfare sense but in His teaching on leadership. He overturned an existing order. In the world's ears, the term *servant* spoke everywhere of low prestige, low respect, low honor. Most people were not attracted to such a low-value role. When Jesus used the term, however, it was a synonym for greatness” (p. 21). Often Christians and Christianity will promote servant leadership, and it is therefore a common belief that one should be a servant leader in their religion. “Jesus' teaching on servanthood and suffering was not intended to merely inspire good behavior. Jesus wanted to impart the spirit of servanthood (Sanders, 2007, p. 24).

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Servant leadership is a global concept, as discussed above and this is also supported through others' research, including Winston and Ryan (2008). “As long as the concept of servant leadership is incorrectly deemed a Western concept, people who see Western thought as contrary to local beliefs or a form of colonialism seeking to impose values and beliefs over the local beliefs will be reluctant to accept it; and the world may miss out on a humane form of leadership” (Winston & Ryan, 2008, p. 220). Many cultures across the world have determined that servanthood, and ultimately servant leadership, is beneficial and highly encouraged within their current worldview. Even though this type of leadership is more prevalent in the western culture, it is an area that is rising among other parts of the world (Merino, 2016).

Additionally, many have decided to dedicate their life to serve others. It is more prevalent than one may think. How many people across the world voluntarily serve in their government's military? How many organizations have decided to give back to their

community and the world? Organizations that give to charities are ubiquitous across the United States, and rising. The top three charities in the United States that received private donations totaled approximately nine billion dollars in 2016; these charities included United Way Worldwide, Task Force Global Health, and Feeding America (Barrett, 2016). People today want to serve the community and the world, they want to do this through various ways, one of which is by supporting brands and organizations that make a difference and as quoted by Fromm (2017), “add good,” when speaking about the millennial generation; “‘Add good’ has been their mantra as they utilize newfound ways to give back. Rather than making a random or one-off donations, they are a generation characterized by integrating the causes they care about into their daily routines and purchase behaviors.” It is now common to expect many of the companies that people support day-to-day to support a cause (Fromm, 2017). The community at large wants to make a difference not only in their own lives but also in others’ lives, especially to those who are in need; in other words, many people today have a desire to take what they have been given and to serve the underprivileged, the needy, and the lost.

Daily, people are serving their countries and communities, making an impact in their own lives and those they may not personally know. How much more can a leader make an impact in their employee’s life when they are able to serve them on a more intimate level and raise them up on their shoulders? One must ask the leader, for whom are they leading? For themselves, to make their name and leadership known temporarily, or for a cause, to go beyond themselves, creating a lasting effect, which could in the end make their name stand for a much greater calling!

## DISCUSSION

Servant leadership is more prevalent than one might think. Servanthood and concepts throughout servant leadership have been identified in at least one major worldview in every continent. People want to be served, they want to know that others care about them, they want to serve in assorted venues, and they want to make a difference. Some leaders want their followers to think servant leadership is counter-cultural and uncommon, which creates an environment where it is not expected.

Global leaders should take the above conclusions into account, in the sense that most worldviews have a high moral belief in line with the role of the servant. In addition to conducting research on the diverse cultures one may encounter in one’s workplace, learning how to serve those around oneself will be essential to becoming not only a servant leader, but a global leader. Leaders within global environments must learn that one’s own perspective and responsibilities should not be seen as higher or more valued than others. As leaders come alongside those within their organization they are able to be united in serving each other, the organization, and the mission in which they will be coming together to accomplish.

Ghandi believed (as cited by Low, 2012), “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others” (p. 175). To lose oneself in the service of others may be more difficult than one may think; however, having a great vision to strive toward creates an environment where there is purpose behind every service. Putting the needs of others over oneself is not natural, and hence the reasoning many attribute servant leadership as countercultural, yet it is time to look to the many instead of the few. It is time to strengthen the whole and lower the individual, to create organizations and teams that are developing one another, and in the end resulting in everyone’s growth! Martin Luther King Jr. said (Robinson, 2009),

“Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve...You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love. And you can be that servant” (pp. 50-51).

The goal is people, the goal is to serve; the goal is to make a difference by allowing others to be propelled by today’s leaders!

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