

Servant-Leadership  
in Dynamic Organizational Environments  
Research Proposal

Steve Robbins  
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Gonzaga University

**Abstract**

Robert Greenleaf's 1977 book titled, *Servant Leadership*, and James McGregor Burns' 1978 seminal work titled, *Leadership*, spawned the development of both transformational and servant-leadership as distinct theories (Yukl, 2010). Since that time, many researchers have debated whether or not there is in fact a difference between the two. Smith, Montagno, and Kuzmenko (2004) concluded that there is a significant difference, particularly in that transformational leadership is best suited for organizations in dynamic or high change environments, and servant-leadership best suited for stable environments. Research is lacking to support their conclusion. This proposal is to conduct qualitative research challenging part of Smith, et al.'s (2004) conclusion, by narrowing in on whether or not followers in servant-leadership organizations experience frustration during times of dynamic change. Non-random sampling using a Likert-type scale of seven steps will be conducted on adult employees up through middle-management of United States based organizations which self-identify as following a servant-leadership model. Quota sampling will be used to help differentiate responses based on gender, race, age, level of management, industry, or represented market segment.

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## Servant-Leadership in Dynamic Organizational Environments

## Research Proposal

Leadership is not easily defined, but most definitions assume that leadership seeks to influence other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities or relationships within an organization. Other than that, there is little consensus among definitions (Yukl, 2010). Beginning in the 1980s, researchers became more interested in the symbolic or emotional aspects of leadership in which leaders look to influence followers to make sacrifices based on the needs of the organization's mission. Transformational and servant-leadership models fall into this broad category. Theories of transformational leadership were primarily influenced by James McGregor Burns' 1978 seminal work titled, *Leadership*, in which transforming leaders were shown as those who appealed to the moral values of the followers and urged them to effect ethical change in the organization. The concept of servant-leadership, and its rise in popularity as an organizational model, is widely credited to Robert Greenleaf who, in 1970, proposed the concept of servant-as-leader, popularized by his 1977 book titled, *Servant Leadership* (Yukl, 2010). It described a concept in which leaders placed the interests of the followers above those of the leader, and in which the leader focused on empowering and encouraging personal development among the followers (Smith, et. al., 2004). Servant-leadership is rapidly getting recognition as an organizational model worth considering in both terms of profitability and quality, especially since it has been adopted by some of the top performing companies such as Southwest Airlines, The Container Store, and Starbucks, among others<sup>1</sup>. These three have been called "Firms of Endearment" for returning more than 1025% over a ten-year period (Sipe

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<sup>1</sup> Other top-performing companies often referenced as examples of Servant-Leadership are: Herman, Miller, TDIndustries, ServiceMaster, and Men's Wearhouse (Barrow & Mirabella, 2009).

&Frick, 2009). In another case, North Mississippi Medical Center, the largest rural hospital in the United States, won the coveted Malcom Baldrige National Quality Award after adopting servant-leadership practices (Barrow & Mirabella, 2009).

Servant-leadership is so similar to a transformational-type organizational model that many researchers debate whether or not there is actually a difference between the two. Smith, et al. (2004) found a difference in that, "the servant leadership model works better in a more stable external environment and serves evolutionary developmental purposes, whereas transformational leadership is the model for organizations facing intense external pressure where revolutionary change is a necessity for survival" (p.9).

This research proposes to use a quantitative method to challenge the conclusions drawn by Smith, et al. (2004). Considering the breath of research that would be required to adequately challenge their conclusion regarding both transformational and servant-leadership, this research proposal will look at whether or not servant-leadership is suited to dynamic high-change environments, particularly whether or not organizations that model servant-leadership cause follower frustration during times of dynamic or high change.

### **Literature Review**

With the rise of corporate scandal and growing mistrust of organizations, the public is calling for more transparency and corporate responsibility. Servant-leadership has emerged as a strong leadership model because of its emphasis on social responsibility (Berger, 2014). Parris and Peachey (2013) concluded that servant-leadership is a viable and valuable theory for both individual and organization. Servant-leadership, along with transformational leadership, are often considered to be charismatic-type leadership models, where it is the charisma of the leader

that is able to effect follower identification with the leader (Smith, et al., 2004; Yukl, 2010).

Barrow and Mirabella (2009) referred to the servant-leadership model as an *other-oriented* one, in which the leader is able to focus both on the objectives of the organization and the well-being of the employees (Barrow & Mirabella, 2009). Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) stated that the servant-leader's distinctive characteristics lie first and primary in self-concept and primary intent. Furthermore, they stated that servant-leaders not only take on the role of servant, but also the nature of one.

Whereas empirical research has been supportive for transformational leadership theory, evidence supporting servant-leadership has been mostly anecdotal (Yukl, 2010). Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2003) concluded that, when compared to other theories, servant-leadership theory is in its infancy. This has presented a clear problem. Although the so-called "test" of servant-leadership promoted by Greenleaf (2002) has been widely quoted, there is to this date, no universally-accepted definition of what is servant-leadership (Berger, 2014). Berger (2014) noted that Robert Greenleaf did not actually develop a theory of Servant Leadership, but instead moved the focus from the leader to the interaction between leader and follower. Sendjaya, and Sarros (2002) recommended that research needs to be done to establish servant-leadership as a valuable model, particularly with regards to being able to describe why leaders do what they do, and to be able to synthesize the data into a predictive behavioral model.

Since servant-leadership has not been clearly defined, research is lacking. At this time, it may be more rightly considered a movement instead of theory. Over time, a number of models, definitions, and conceptual frameworks have been proposed, and as yet, scholars in servant-leadership have yet to address the construction and evaluation of strong leadership theory,

including an accepted common vocabulary (Berger, 2014). Parris and Peachey (2013) also concluded that servant-leadership theory remains under-defined with no consensus in definition.

Smith, et al. (2004) defined four distinct theoretical elements of transformation theory as, a) charismatic leadership/idealized influence, b) inspirational motivation, c) intellectual stimulation, and, d) individualized consideration. In contrast, they identified the six elements of servant-leadership as, a) valuing people, b) developing people, c) building community, d) displaying authenticity, e) providing leadership, and, f) sharing leadership. Each of these elements within both systems have characteristic behaviors. In an effort to integrate the theories, Smith, et al. (2004) considered two questions in their research: a) which behaviors overlap? b) to what extent is each model appropriate for what context? Complicating the matter is that, as valuable as they are, traits such as love, compassion, caring, and altruism, are not as important as the quality of perceptive listening (p. 46). Earnhardt (2008) conducted quantitative research on the effects of servant-leadership among military members using a model with seven distinct elements: a) agapao<sup>2</sup> love, b) humility, c) altruism, d) vision, e) trust, f) empowerment, and, g) service. He concluded that servant-leadership had a positive effect overall, and that military affiliation or gender did not have a difference on servant leadership. He found that military rank did have a measurable difference in vision.

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<sup>2</sup> “Patterson (2003) originated the idea of agapao love for her model of servant leadership. As stated by Patterson, ‘This love is shown by leaders who consider each person as a total person-one with needs, wants and desires’ [and is one who] does not hold ‘a particular affinity for the abstract corporation or organization: rather, they value the people who constitute the organization. This is not an emotional endeavor but rather an unconditional concern for the well being of those who form the entity’” (Earnhardt, 2008, p. 15).

There appear to be several significant limitations to servant-leadership theory, especially in that the welfare of followers have top priority and at times may be more important than the leader's career or the performance of the organization (Yukl, 2010). Secondly, considering that quite a bit of empirical research has been conducted supporting the transformational leadership model, but most existing evidence for a servant-leadership theory is anecdotal, arriving at a definitive contextual comparison of transformational and servant-leadership models in high-change organization environments will require additional research. Lowder (2009), after having looked at research by Smith, et. al. (2004), among others, concluded that transformational leadership is the best model for developing followership and dealing with organizational change management in a dynamic business climate.

Barrow and Mirabella (2009) found that there is not a significant difference in leadership preferences between men and women. They found that there were significant differences based on leadership role, employment status, and age. They concluded that this is an important factor for future leaders to consider. They concluded that other-oriented leadership models will be necessary to compete in the competitive global marketplace. Washington (2014) concluded that servant-leadership is able to cope with a rapidly changing dynamic global environment characterized by international competition, faster technology, and demographically changing workforce.

Washington (2014) found gaps in that further research is needed to see how servant-leadership may help "complete" other theories, such as transformational or empowerment leadership. Washington, Sutton, and Suasser (2014) raised significant questions that need to be addressed, such as: a) what is the real difference, if any, between servant-leadership and

transformational leadership? b) Is servant-leadership just a subset of transformational leadership or vice versa? and, c) Are transformational leadership and servant-leadership the same theory, except for their use of different names?

Parris and Peachey (2013) conducted an extensive systematic literature review of servant-leadership theory in organizational contexts with an objective to synthesize research from empirical studies. They concluded that a comprehensive summary of empirical studies in servant-leadership had never been conducted in organizational contexts up until that time. They stated that, although servant-leadership is applicable in a variety of cultures, contexts, and organizational settings, different attributes perceived to make up servant-leadership are not weighted equally across cultures. This is an area that will require more research.

### **Theoretical Basis**

To do an accurate comparison between servant-leadership and transformational theory, one must have an understanding of each one. This section will give a brief philosophical overview underpinning the theories, followed by some key comparisons.

**Transformational leadership theory.** At its core, transforming leadership stands on the moral high ground that human beings have certain intrinsic moral rights, such as justice, equality of human rights, and respect for human dignity. At the highest stage of moral development, persons are guided by these near-universal principles (Burns, 1978). Transforming leadership seeks to establish those rights for all humanity based on the concept that, “it is a complex moral relationship between people, based on trust, obligation, commitment, emotion, and a shared vision of the good” (Ciulla, 2004, p. xv). The problem is that, due to human nature, the moral relationship is often compromised, damaged, or destroyed. Human tendencies to control

frequently give rise to oppressive structures in which one attempts to exploit the other for one's own ambition or good. "Any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression" (Friere, 1993, p. 55). These oppressive structures destroy the moral relationship, trust, and shared vision of the good between the parties. It destroys the ability of individuals to achieve self-affirmation and the pursuit of happiness. Transformational leadership then is geared to addressing these moral issues and the cultivation of trust.

**Servant-leadership theory.** Robert Greenleaf is widely credited with the concepts of servant-leadership. He stated that the servant-leader is servant first, and begins with the desire to first serve, then lead. According to him, this type of leader is different than the one who desires to first lead (Greenleaf, 2002). He proposed a simple "test" to determine whether or not a leader is functioning as a servant-leader; it has been widely quoted.

The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served* [emphasis by author], become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And* [emphasis by author], what is the effect on the least privileged of society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 27)

Loosely speaking, the purpose of servant-leadership is to promote a more caring society. Greenleaf (2002) stated, "this is my thesis, caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built (p. 62). Horseman (2014) said that servant-leadership was rooted in serving first, and focused toward creating greater meaning

and fulfillment, greater relational engagement, greater personal, group, organization, community transformation, and generally, general human flourishing.

**Theoretical comparison.** Smith, et al. (2004) identified basic behavioral elements of both transformational and servant-leadership models. Their research showed that servant-leadership is a form of transformational leadership and both are similar in terms of the concepts of stewardship, system thinking, and learning. However, they found that subtle differences exist. For instance, in servant-leadership, intellectual stimulation such as affirmation and encouragement refer to developing people's personal growth and potential. Transformational leadership views it more in terms of innovation and creativity. Servant-leadership does not really address issues such as risk-taking in strategic planning or implementing efficiency programs, both of which are often necessary for organizational growth. On the other hand, both of these are elements addressed in transformational leadership models (Smith, et al., 2004).

Smith, et al. (2004) concluded that servant-leadership leads to a "spiritual generative culture," whereas transformational leadership leads to an "empowered dynamic culture" (p. 87). Parolini (2012) attempted to combine the caring aspect of servant-leadership with the results orientation of transformational leadership into a hybrid model, referring to it as, *Transformational Servant Leadership*. She defined it as, "the ability to cast a collaborative moral vision while actively caring for those participating in moving the vision to reality" (p. 13).

Stone, et al. (2003) considered the theoretical framework, characteristics, and focus, of both transformational and servant-leadership with the intent of determining the differences between the two. They concluded that the principal difference is in the focus of the leader;

transformational leaders focus primarily on organizational objectives, and servant-leaders focus mainly on the people who are their followers.

Waddell (2006) stated that there is need for more empirical research as to the motivations underpinning the servant-leader, she suggested that it be linked to the standardized Meyers-Briggs type indicator, an analysis tool which identifies an individual's preference for four of eight different characteristics of human behavior. Her conclusion is that servant-leaders are most likely to have a preference for the introversion characteristic instead of extroversion.

### **Research Rationale**

It is generally held that there is substantial overlap between the two theories. A key issue for this proposed research is to determine if the minute differences between them actually matter in terms of developing a framework for coping with real-life organizational environments. The questions raised will attempt to substantiate part of Smith, et al.'s (2004) statement that, "the servant leadership model works better in a more stable external environment and serves evolutionary developmental purposes, whereas transformational leadership is the model for organizations facing intense external pressure where revolutionary change is a necessity for survival" (p. 9).

If Smith, et al. (2004) are correct, this is an extremely important distinction with practical organizational implications. For instance, they postulate that if a servant-leadership model is used in a dynamic external environment, employees will likely become frustrated because the leader would not appear to be significantly aggressive enough to deal with the external forces. Further research is needed to determine whether or not this is able to be substantiated.

Some research indicates that leadership styles may have to change as the organization matures. In some situations a transformational style would serve best in the early stages of dynamic growth when critical success or failure is at stake, and later, when the organization is stable, a servant-leadership model may work best with its focus on follower's self-actualization. (Smith, et al., 2004).

### **Research questions.**

To address the question of whether or not servant-leadership is suited to dynamic, high-change environments, the following questions will be explored:

RQ1: Does the organization characterize a servant-leadership model in a “dynamic” environment?

This question seeks to qualify the organization.

RQ2: What is employee frustration with their servant-leadership in times of high-change?

This question seeks to receive subjective employee feedback as the effectiveness of the servant-leaders in times of dynamic environment.

RQ3: What is employee satisfaction with their servant-leadership in times of high-change?

This question seeks to receive subjective employee feedback as the effectiveness of the servant-leaders in times of dynamic environment

### **Methodology**

The study will use a quantitative method in an attempt to verify Smith, et al.'s (2004), conclusion that organizations structured around a servant-leadership model are primarily suited to stable environments and that during times of chaos, conflict, or high change, employees will likely become frustrated with their leadership. Lowder (2009) supported their conclusion. Neuman (2011) stated that a quantitative study, as opposed to a qualitative one, is best suited to

verify or falsify an existing hypothesis and is used to test a previously stated hypothesis (pp. 166-167, 174).

Considering that there is no agreement as to the definition of servant-leadership (Smith, et al., 2004; Berger, 2014; Washington, 2014), and some, such as Washington, et al. (2014), questioned whether or not there is any significant difference between servant-leadership and transformational leadership, the first research question must qualify the organization being surveyed to make sure it is indeed structured around a servant-leadership model. Smith, et al. (2004) defined the six elements of servant-leadership as, a) valuing people, b) developing people, c) building community, d) displaying authenticity, e) providing leadership, and, f) sharing. Since this study will challenge the conclusions drawn by Smith, et al. (2004), it would seem logical to adhere as closely as possible to their definitions. However, since Spears and Lawrence's (2002), ten characteristics of a servant-leader are widely quoted, they should be strongly considered.

The second and third research questions will survey employee frustration and satisfaction with their leadership during periods of high dynamic change. The questions will be designed to clarify what is dynamic change, and determine perceived strengths and weaknesses of servant-leadership in that context, using a language that is able to precisely measure the variables, as suggested by Neuman (2011).

Triangulation is important to gain accuracy (Neuman, 2011). This will be achieved by a variety of surveys and questionnaires in which the same questions are addressed to each employee in different ways. Research ethics will be strictly observed as recommended by Ericksson and Kovalainen (2011). Individuals will be adult individuals so issues pertaining to minors will not be a problem.

**Scope.** A major problem to conducting this proposed research is that there is no consensus as to the definition of servant-leadership (Berger, 2014; Parris & Peachey, 2013; Smith, et al., 2004; Washington, 2014). Defining this variable is critical, so in the absence of a universally-held or agreed-upon definition, and considering the complexity of qualifying organizations as those exhibiting a servant-leadership model, this research will be conducted on organizations that self-indentify as servant-leadership organizations. Smith, et al. (2004) addressed organizations as a whole, not the individual leader within the organization. Considering that it is likely that individual managers or other leaders within the organization may not act according to that mode. This research will seek to narrow the focus, so that the followers' responses are based on the whole organization, not the actions of their individual leader, supervisor, or manager. In order to best verify Smith, et al.'s (2004) conclusion, this research will use the definition of servant-leadership used in their research. The second variable to be addressed is that of dynamic, or high-change. A clear definition will be set forth to be used in the research so that followers are able to identify the characteristics of dynamic or high-change environments and respond accordingly. The third variable is that of frustration. This study will define what frustration is in the context of dynamic and high-change environments. It will also attempt to closely match the definitions proposed by Smith, et al. (2004) for all three variables, a) servant-leadership, b) dynamic or high-change environments, and c) frustration.

Considering the lack of research pertaining to servant-leadership cross-culturally, specifically across national or global boundaries (Parris & Peachey, 2013), this study will focus on companies operating within the United States. They may be American-based or foreign-

owned. Ownership will not be defining criteria. The research will not be limited to any specific industries or market sectors.

The study will be limited to all employees, middle-management or lower, with the objective of getting responses from a wide representation of levels of responsibility. Upper management will not be included in this study. Persons identified as having control over direction or management of the company as a whole will not be selected as respondents.

**Method.** A quantitative approach will be used because it will best verify Smith, et al.'s (2004) hypothesis (Neuman, 2011, pp. 166-167, 174). The survey will potentially cover a large number of organizations spread geographically across the United States. It would not likely be financially feasible to make on-site visits to all, so respondents will be asked to respond to a questionnaire. Triangulation will be important (Neuman, 2011, pp. 164-165). Although no differentiation will be made as to gender, race, or age, the survey will collect that data on a voluntary basis for possible future use.

**Research methods.** The survey will use both paper and online (electronic) questionnaires to gather information based on an ordinal level of measurement (Neuman, 2011, pp. 218-219), using a Likert type scale of at least seven scale steps, and including a neutral step (pp. 226-230). An index is not needed for this research as a scale is able to ascertain the intensity, direction, level and potency of the necessary variable constructs (p. 222). The survey will be structured to address the research questions in more than one way, thus providing redundancy.

Sampling will be a non-probability convenience sampling, not random (Neuman, 2011, p. 242). This should be sufficient for the purposes of this survey challenging the validity of Smith,

et al.'s (2004) conclusion. A quota sampling is preferred to help differentiate responses based on gender, race, age, level of management, industry, or represented market segment (p. 243).

**Data collection.** Prior to conducting the survey, research will be conducted to compile a list of all known organizations in the United States self-identified as servant-leadership organizations, and that information will be used to categorize the organizations by industry or market segment. All organizations will be contacted with a request to participate in the research by letter and follow-up telephone call. Interested parties will be sent a packet explaining in detail the research procedure, method, and questions, and invited to participate in a subsequent video conference. Contracts will be signed with participating organizations, and time frames arranged for surveys to be conducted.

A test instrument (questionnaire) will be developed and pilot-tested (Neuman, 2011) in at least one organization within each identified industry or market-segment. Information gathered from the pilot-test will be used to refine the survey instrument prior to rolling it out to all participating organizations. The data collected from administering those pilot-tests will be analyzed and verified for accuracy by a telephone interview process with each of the selected respondents. Selections of respondents for the interview process will be non-random, and although not critical due to objective of validation of test instrument, best effort would be made to interview based on sample guidelines suggested in *Determining sample size from a given population*, (Downs, & Adrian, 2004, p. 29), or per Neuman (2011, pp. 263-267).

Once pilot testing done, all participating organizations will be contacted. A liaison contact will be established in each (Downs & Adrian, 2004), who will be responsible to publicize and oversee the distribution of the questionnaire. The liaison person will be instructed on the

importance of publicizing why the survey is being conducted, the general parameters of the survey, explain which research group was behind the study, and request full participation (p. 29). Three forms of publicity will be requested, a) managers and supervisors will be notified that the survey will be conducted, b) a letter will be sent from a top manager to all respondents that the research is supported by the company, and c) an announcement should be put in the company's printed media (Downs, & Adrian, 2004, p. 30). Once publicity has been completed, survey packets will be distributed to employees with explanation on how to fill out the questionnaires, and what to do with them when done. The liaison will coordinate timely return of all questionnaires.

Sample size will be determined by typical charts, such as, *Determining sample size from a given population*, (Downs, & Adrian, 2004, p. 29), or per Neuman (2011, pp. 263-267).

Following the standard measurements for valid sample size is important.

**Data analysis.** The results of all surveys will be tabulated based on measures of central tendency (Neuman, 2011, p. 389), where mode, mean, median, and distribution are calculated. Once tabulated, the results will be compared to Smith, et al.'s (2004) conclusion. A final report will be written per academic research standards (Neuman, 2011, pp. 542-572).

### **Ethical Considerations.**

Research ethics will be strictly observed as recommended by Ericksson and Kovalainen (2011), and Neuman (2011), where compliance is voluntary, and results are treated confidentially. Individuals will be adults, so legal issues pertaining to minors will not be a problem. No specific identifiable information regarding identity or demographics of the individuals will be collected.

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