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Servant Leadership: Strengths, Weaknesses, and a Path Forward

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Abstract

Servant leadership, despite its popularity among academics and practitioners and consistent research findings that demonstrate its benefits for multiple stakeholders, like other leadership approaches, has not been immune to criticism. In this essay, the views of a servant leadership researcher or “insider” are presented along with the criticism of an “outsider” who has not been involved in conducting servant leadership research. The outsider identifies lack of theory development necessary to explain the mechanisms through which servant leadership affects outcomes, lack of theoretical justification of servant leadership dimensions, and measurement issues as the key problems with servant leadership research. The insider then counters these criticisms with a discussion of scale development procedures backing servant leadership measurement along with supportive empirical findings. We conclude with recommendations agreed upon by both the insider and outsider for how servant leadership theory may be enhanced and measurement improved to benefit not only academic research on servant leadership, but also its implementation in practice.

Servant Leadership: Strengths, Weaknesses, and a Path Forward

Servant leadership has become an established field of research within the leadership domain. In this essay, we consider the current state of the science in servant leadership theory and research both from the perspective of an insider in servant leadership research -- someone who has studied servant leadership for years -- and from the perspective of an outsider to servant leadership research -- someone who has studied leadership for years but has not studied servant leadership. Our intention in sharing these perspectives is to identify key issues for servant leadership research to address moving forward.

The rationale behind this insider-outsider approach is that, on the one hand, someone who has contributed to shaping the current state of the science may not identify as problems what someone who looks at the state of the science with “a fresh pair of eyes” sees as problematic, whereas, on the other hand, someone who is not actively involved in servant leadership research may be unaware of some of the thinking behind the current state of the science and as a result may not identify ways forward to address problematic issues that an insider to servant leadership theory and research would identify. Thus, our focus is on identifying key “points of contention” that ideally future research in servant leadership would address to move servant leadership theory and research forward -- as well as to outline some of the ways in which these issues could be addressed. The assumption behind this approach is that the insider and outsider perspective do not need to agree on the extent to which there is a problem or on the solution to the problem. Rather, we have sought to converge on the issues that would seem most valuable for future research to address for servant leadership research to persuade insiders and outsiders both.

Insider Perspective: Robert C. Liden

Servant leadership was introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf based on reflections on his

career at American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T). He started out working on crews installing telephone poles and worked his way up the ladder to become the Director of Management Research. It was from his experience as a follower, leader, and observer of leaders within AT&T that Greenleaf developed his views on effective leadership. Later in his career and into retirement he formed relationships with academics, including Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) professor Douglas McGregor, author of the classic book *The Human Side of Enterprise* (1960) in which he introduced Theory X and Theory Y. Greenleaf continued interactions with McGregor, especially after McGregor invited him as a visiting lecturer at MIT (Frick, 2004). Greenleaf viewed Theory Y as the assumption of people made by more effective leaders. He adapted the idea that leaders play a key role in intrinsically motivating followers on a path towards fulfilling their full potential. Greenleaf integrated the observations he had made of both effective and ineffective leaders across his 38-year career with academic perspectives gleaned from interactions with McGregor. Greenleaf, in a sense, acted like a qualitative researcher by reflecting on his vast experience in leader development at AT&T and integrating these reflections with relevant theory. One can claim that Greenleaf was engaging in inductive theory development. Indeed, the dimensions of servant leadership that he identified in his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf, 1970), are based on observed behaviors. Later authors have introduced other servant leadership dimensions, but all gravitate around the theme of prioritizing the needs of stakeholders, especially direct reports, above the leader's own needs.

Although Greenleaf (1970) introduced servant leadership prior to the emergence of what became dominant approaches to leadership, such as transformational leadership and LMX (Dinh et al., 2014), empirical academic research on servant leadership did not commence until the 2000s. Since Ehrhart's ground-breaking article in 2004, research on servant leadership has grown

exponentially. By 2015 enough servant leadership studies had been published for Hoch and her colleagues to begin work on their meta-analysis, which was published in 2018. They demonstrated in their meta-analysis that servant leadership, as compared with transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership, explained the most incremental variance in key outcomes, such as follower organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior. Subsequent meta-analyses based on substantially more studies also showed that servant leadership outperformed these other “positive” approaches to leadership (Chaudhry et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Lee and colleagues found trust, justice, and the quality of leader-follower relationships (LMX) to be the key mechanisms through which servant leadership is related to outcomes.

Outsider Perspective: Daan van Knippenberg

Servant leadership has clearly established itself as construct within the leadership domain with a sizeable volume of research; narrative reviews (Eva et al., 2019; Lemoine et al., 2019) as well as meta-analysis (Lee et al., 2020) make this clear. Because, by definition, the main drivers of these research developments are the insiders in servant leadership research – the ones actually doing the research – there is value in taking stock of the state of the science also from the perspective of an outsider who did not commit to studying servant leadership and thus did not contribute to that state of the science. From my outsider perspective, there is a fundamental problem with servant leadership research that makes me unwilling to accept the evidence speaking to servant leadership’s effectiveness (e.g., Lee et al., 2020) as valid. The core reason for me to identify this problem is that servant leadership shares some of the same issues that van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) identified for charismatic-transformational leadership.

Servant leadership is understood to be a multi-dimensional construct (Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). These

multidimensional conceptualizations are associated with multidimensional measurement (Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) that seem to have been developed concurrently to be overlapping but also somewhat distinct, and that in a recent review by Eva et al. (2019) have been called the “recommended measures of servant leadership behavior” (2019, p. 116). Liden et al. (2008) identify emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, and behaving ethically as the seven dimensions of servant leadership. Sendjaya et al. (2008) propose voluntary subordination, authentic self, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, transcendental spirituality, and transforming influence as the six dimensions of servant leadership. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) suggested that empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, authenticity, courage, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship are the eight dimensions of servant leadership.

My concern is not with the similarities and differences between these measurement models in capturing servant leadership, but with the problematic communalities of these models in, first, not providing persuasive theory about why these dimensions together make up servant leadership and how they combine to form servant leadership and, second, suggesting that servant leadership is a behavioral construct while measurement combines perceptions of leadership behavior with attributions about leader internal states and leadership effects.

The Absence of Adequate Multi-dimensional Theory

In their analysis of the validity problems with charismatic-transformational leadership, van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) highlighted a problem that potentially applies to all multi-dimensional leadership constructs. This issue has two elements.

The first element to the issue is that there is no clear theory why the construct would be

made up of the given dimensions and not more, or less, or others. Liden et al. (2008) set out with a taxonomy (not theory) identifying nine dimensions and then ended up with seven, as this is what the measurement model supported. Sendjaya et al.'s (2008) taxonomy identified six dimensions, which their measurement model supported. Van Dierendonck's (2011) taxonomy identified six dimensions that van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) measurement model turned into eight dimensions. I say "taxonomy" and not "theory" here, because these dimensions were identified from a review of the literature and the elements of servant leadership invoked in that literature. They were not a statement of theory that conceptualized servant leadership as a higher-order construct such that from that conceptualization it could be logically argued that servant leadership would have the particular dimensions identified (and no more, no less, no others). The fact that the proposed multi-dimensional nature of the construct changed because of what the measurement model supported (which is based on the content of items produced and does not follow directly from theory) for two out of three measures illustrates the conceptual problem. When dimensions do not follow from overarching theory but from the factor structure that the survey items used support, this is a challenge for theory development.

The second element to this issue is that there is no theory about how the different dimensions combine to form servant leadership. There is only the practice of taking their average. As van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) outlined for charismatic-transformational leadership, this is highly problematic from a construct validity point of view. In effect, taking the average over dimensions implies that they are all in the same: When the leader scores high on behavior A (say 5 on a 5-point scale) and low on behavior B (say 1 on a 5-point scale), in the averaging model this is equal to the leader scoring high on B (5) and low on A (1) in terms of the leader's leadership score (3). It is, however, hard to see how doing A but not B equals to doing B

but not A.

The fact that these dimensions are highly correlated in practice and thus unlikely to substantially diverge does not solve the conceptual issue: empirical evidence for correlation does not substitute for theory for correlation. Moreover, one cannot have one's cake and eat it too. If these dimensions are sufficiently distinct to distinguish as separate elements of servant leadership, they should not be equated in averaging models. But if they are so highly correlated that they justify averaging, they should not be distinguished as separate dimensions.

Measurement models set aside, the conclusion advanced in this respect by van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) also applies here: as multi-dimensional models of servant leadership, these models require theory about how the different dimensions combine to form servant leadership. As per the above, the one theory that does not make sense is the in practice theory of taking their average. Rather what would be required is theory about how these are, for instance, interactive influences, such that the influence of the one is stronger at higher levels of the other. In this respect, van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) note for charismatic-transformational leadership what I would note here for servant leadership (and will revisit later). This is that once the averaging model is abandoned (as I believe it should be), it probably makes more sense to treat the different dimensions as separate elements of leadership rather than to force-fit them into an overarching construct called servant leadership.

Confounding Leader Behavior and Attributions About Leadership

As Eva et al. (2019) note, the most used measures of servant leadership (Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) are understood to be measures of servant leadership behavior. Consideration of the content of the measurement items shows, however, that not all items are behavioral, or not purely behavioral. Some items reference

attributions about leader intrapersonal states or attributions about leadership effects, or a combination of the two rather than leader behavior. Both present core validity concerns.

Consider for instance “I would seek help from my manager if I had a personal problem” from Liden et al. (2008), which does not reference leader behavior but presumably taps into follower beliefs about the leader’s attitude towards the follower and/or the leader’s ability to help the follower. Or consider “My manager finds it difficult to forget things that went wrong in the past” from van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), which directly references attributions about leader internal states but not behavior. Or consider “My manager can solve work problems with new or creative ideas” from Liden et al. (2008), or “Contributes to my personal and professional growth” from Sendjaya et al. (2008), which arguably are at least as much statement about the perceived effects of leadership as they are of leader behavior. My intention here is not to nitpick about survey items, but to highlight the validity problems associated with confounding ratings of leader behavior with ratings of leader intrapersonal states and with attributions about the effects of leadership.

Treating subjective perceptions of behavior as relatively accurate measures of behavior can be criticized as a practice in behavioral research more broadly, but, acknowledging the subjectivity of perceptions of others’ behavior, there is a reasonable case that leader behavior in leader-follower interaction is at least directly observable for the followers that rate the leader behavior. In contrast, there is no good case that followers can rate with reasonable validity leaders’ internal states unless they have been made aware of these through the leader’s behavior – in which case, if the measurement is to be a behavioral measure of leadership, the more valid measure will be of the behavior (Gooty, Banks, McBride, & van Knippenberg, 2024). The bigger issue here is conceptual, however: when the measure does not concern leader behavior but

follower attributions about leader internal states, this requires different theory. Gooty et al. (2024) outline this for the difference between leader authenticity (which is contingent on leaders' actual internal states) and follower perceptions of leader authenticity (which can be influenced by factors that are independent of leaders' internal states). This is a discussion that is also relevant here, not only given the emphasis on authenticity in servant leadership models (Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), but also because of the bigger issue that follower perceptions of leader internal states can be influenced by many factors other than the leader's internal state. These may include influences that are not leader behavior and that thus do not fit into the notion that servant leadership is leader behavior (cf. Eva et al., 2019).

There also is two-fold validity problem associated with confounding ratings of leader behavior with attributions about the effects of leadership (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). The first element in this has clear parallels with the problem of confounding ratings of leader behavior with ratings of leader intrapersonal states. Leadership effects may be more observable to followers than leader internal states, but beyond that the same issue applies: if the claim is that the measure is a measure of leader behavior, and theory wants to treat this as a measure of leader behavior, then that theory does not apply to follower perceptions of leadership effects. The second element to this problem is that behavioral models of leadership are used to predict the effects of leadership. From this perspective, it is a major validity issues if the presumed measure of behavior includes measurement of perceived effects. That effectively amounts to using perceived leadership effects to predict leadership effects. This make little conceptual sense in and of itself; servant leadership theory also is not about how perceived leadership effects result in leadership effects but about how leader behavior results in leadership effects. From an empirical perspective, it also means that the issue of reverse causality looms large: perceived performance

indicators are attributed to leadership – performance causes leadership *ratings* rather than leadership behavior causing performance (and measuring performance after leadership is measured does not solve the issue, as raters will be aware of performance as an ongoing process).

What Does This Mean For Servant Leadership Theory and Measurement?

It is important to emphasize that the issues I identify with the state of the science in servant leadership research – the absence of multi-dimensional theory and the confounding of leader behavior with attributions about leader internal states and leadership effects – are not just measurement issues. Indeed, it is probably more appropriate to see the measurement issues and the resulting empirical issues – unclarity about what can be concluded on the basis of empirical findings – as *downstream consequences of servant leadership theory problems*.

Realistically, no measurement is going to be better than the theory it is based on. The averaging model combining all servant leadership dimensions in one score is a problem and the fact that measurement items do not only concern leader behavior is a problem. These problems can be fixed by revising measurement to be purely behavioral and to adopt an alternative to the averaging model. To do so, however, requires theoretical development to provide an overarching theory and conceptualization of servant leadership (i) from which its proposed dimensionality logically follows, (ii) that captures the overarching constructs and its dimensions as purely behavioral, and (iii) that captures how the influence of different dimensions combines to produce overall servant leadership effects.

This will be a tall order – too tall perhaps. I have two reasons for this pessimistic observation. First, there is a lot in current servant leadership models that is clearly not (purely) behavioral, such as authenticity, empathy, morality, spirituality, etc. Moving towards a behavioral theory of servant leadership will require moving substantially *away* from current

models of servant leadership. Second, several of the behavioral constructs that are part of current models of servant leadership have also been established as leadership constructs in and of themselves, such as empowering leadership (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999), leader humility (Owens & Hekman, 2012), behavioral integrity (cf. authenticity; Simons, 2002), directive leadership (House, 1996), and stewardship (Hernandez, 2008). From that perspective, in building broader ranging theory that bridges research streams (cf. Cronin, Stouten, & van Knippenberg, 2020), there is greater value in recognizing these as separate constructs to study their independent and interactive influences than in subsuming them into a model of servant leadership (cf. van Knippenberg & Dwertmann, 2022; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

To put a finer point to this, it may be particularly worthwhile to reconceptualize servant leadership as a *unidimensional* construct that captures the unique essence of servant leadership – leading to serve – in strictly behavioral terms and to think of other elements of leadership as exactly that – other elements of leadership. Servant leadership research would then revolve around a unique behavioral construct for which its influence is contingent on other elements of leadership. This may be yet further away from servant leadership researchers’ current thinking, but I expect that it is ultimately the more productive way forward.

Insider Reactions to an Outsider’s Criticism: Robert C. Liden

Despite the popularity of servant leadership among practitioners and academics, it has not escaped criticism. It has been portrayed as a “Disneyland-inspired” (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, p. 383) leadership approach that is too good to be true and one that does “not work in the real world” (Mumford & Fried, 2014, p. 630). The outsider perspective above is more specific and summarizes the key points of contention, which mainly boil down to the lack of a strong theoretical foundation and corresponding questioning of the dimensions making up servant

leadership, and the survey measures used to assess servant leadership. Because of the critical importance of theory as a starting point in scale development, the two main criticisms of servant leadership are highly related.

Essential to theory and scale development is identifying the domain of the focal construct. This requires careful review of theory on the construct that is complemented by the collection of qualitative data to assess the extent to which components/dimensions of a construct are present in work settings. Qualitative data can also identify additional portions of the construct's domain that have not been included in theoretical work on the construct. Greenleaf's (1970) essay is based on thousands of his observations of leaders over the course of his long career at AT&T which serve as qualitative evidence that he employed to lay the foundation for establishing the domain of the servant leadership construct. He identified prioritizing the needs of followers and sharing power through empowering followers as key dimensions of servant leadership. Also unique to servant leadership relative to other leadership approaches, Greenleaf identified community involvement as a key dimension of servant leadership. Long before authentic leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999) was introduced, Greenleaf reasoned that to be a genuine servant leader required being that type of person in all realms of life, at work, with the family, and in the community. Prioritization of follower needs, helping followers grow and succeed, empowerment and community involvement, represent dimensions of servant leadership introduced by Greenleaf and included in contemporary academics' descriptions and measurement of servant leadership (e.g., Ehrhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya, 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Extending beyond direct reports/followers, Graham (1991) and Ehrhart (2004) both explain the process through which servant leaders provide support to multiple stakeholders.

Jill Graham (1991), the first to publish an article on servant leadership in a refereed

academic journal, used Greenleaf (1970) as a starting point to identify theoretical elements of servant leadership. She derived these elements from theory on power, influence, hierarchy, and hubris that are linked to servant leadership, and further discussed how humility guards against hubris. Graham (1991) emphasizes that trust is built with followers when the leader puts the needs of those being led first. She argued that a key determinant of leader effectiveness is the way in which the leader uses power. She contends that trust between leader and follower is further enhanced when leaders share power rather than using power in a coercive manner to control subordinates. It is noteworthy that Lee et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis confirms the important mediating role that trust plays in explaining relationships between servant leadership and outcomes.

In sum, through an integration of previous theory (McGregor, 1960) and numerous observations throughout his long career, Greenleaf (1970) used an inductive approach to identify the domain of servant leadership dimensions of servant leadership, which were further refined by Spears (1998), as well as by academics (e.g., Ehrhart, 2004; Graham, 1991; Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya, 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Greenleaf thus developed an initial definition of servant leadership and proposed key dimensions of the construct, which have been refined in the years since his seminal essay was published (Eva et al., 2019; Graham, 1991; Liden, Panaccio et al., 2014; van Dierendonck, 2011).

In addition to criticisms of servant leadership being atheoretical, critics have questioned the rationale behind the dimensions and how the dimensions combine to represent overall or global servant leadership. The main scales used for empirical research on servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019), those by Liden et al. (2008), Sendjaya et al., 2008, and van Dierendonck and Nuijten, (2011) all employed rigorous psychometric scale development procedures (DeVellis,

2017; Hinkin, 1998). Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) initiated their scale development effort with qualitative interviews from which they confirmed the dimensions of servant leadership that had emerged in conceptual work on the construct. Regarding questions concerning the domain of the construct on how the dimensions map on to overall servant leadership, content validation involving both experts and lay people's assessments support the inclusion of each dimension within the domain of the construct. Content validation involves assessment of each item in terms of its consistency with the definition of the dimension/construct (Colquitt et al., 2019). In addition to identifying items that "passed" content validation, higher order confirmatory factor analyses were conducted that fully support the dimensions as being independent but at the same time falling under a global servant leadership higher-order factor (Hu & Liden, 2011; van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011).

Despite following rigorous scale development methods, servant leadership measures, such as the most frequently used servant leadership scales, the SL-28 (Liden et al., 2008) and SL-7 (Liden et al., 2015) have received criticism (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023) for conflating intentions, behaviors, and effects as summarized in the above outsider perspective. Although it is desirable to ask respondents to focus on rating leader behaviors rather than traits (Hansborough et al., 2021), it is necessary to measure intentions when the behaviors of interest may not have been experienced by all study respondents (Liden et al., 2025). For example, it is likely that a servant leader has never provided personal healing to some followers. Rather than not include items to capture this servant leadership dimension, intentions are asked, such as "I would seek help from my manager if I had a personal problem." A follower who has received such help from the leader can easily respond to this item, but so can followers who have not yet received such help from the leader. It has long been understood in psychology that perceptions of behavior are

more important than reality in determining people's reactions to others. Thus, attributions concerning the leader's intent are critical, especially in the formation of trust. Regardless of the leader's actual behavior, it is a follower's perception of the leader that is most important in determining the followers' corresponding attitudes and behaviors. For example, Dienesch and Liden (1986, p. 629) noted the importance of a follower interpretation of a leader's behavior towards them as, "I am being used" versus "The leader is trying to help me develop professionally." In essence, a follower's attributions for a leader's behaviors are critical to the follower's overall assessment of the leader's style.

The critics of servant leadership survey scales fail to make a distinction between correlations between servant leadership and outcomes based on same source versus multiple source data. For example, Liden and colleagues (2014) reported relations between servant leadership as perceived by followers with customer satisfaction measured directly from customers by a market research firm (thus, two sources of data collected by different research teams). Similarly, the critics of servant leadership measurement have overlooked research that has reported relations between servant leadership and objective financial performance. This again involves two sources of data, with one source being objective (i.e., not perception-based). The results of a field study by Lemoine and colleagues (2024) revealed that the servant leadership of the supervisors of project managers in a U.S. engineering firm was positively related to the average dollar value of each project manager's projects as well as the amount of money that managers contributed in workplace charitable giving (both measured the quarter after the assessment of servant leadership). In a study conducted at the store level in a chain of French home improvement stores, Giolito et al. (2021) demonstrated that store manager servant leadership was positively related to objective financial performance data measured one year later.

Specifically, the more store managers engaged in servant leadership, the higher the revenue and profits of their stores. Similarly in a U.S. sample, Hartnell and colleagues (2020) found bank branch manager servant leadership to be positively related to branch objective performance, operationalized as deposit volume.

Research has also been conducted at the organizational level in studies on CEO servant leadership. Results involving small to medium-sized U.S.-based information technology organizations by Peterson and colleagues (2012) revealed that CEO servant leadership was positively correlated with return on assets measured for 3 quarters following the measurement of servant leadership. Similar effects were also reported in large Nigerian firms. Kim and Liden (in press) discovered that CEO servant leadership, as operationalized as the aggregated perceptions of an average of 9.4 randomly selected employees in each organization, was positively correlated with objective financial data (profits) obtained 3 months after the collection of the survey data. With the exception of Hartnell et al. (2020) all of these studies measured servant leadership using items developed by Liden and colleagues (Liden et al., 2008, 2015) and all studies not only examined an objective indicator of financial performance, but had a substantial time lag between the measurement of servant leadership and the assessment of financial performance. Furthermore, the data were collected on three continents, Africa, Europe, and North America.

The critics have a valid point when results showing relationships between servant leadership and outcomes are based on data collected from the same source, typically followers. Such relationships may indeed be largely due to same source common method variance (Dulebohn et al., 2012). However, correlations between servant leadership and objective financial data, especially when time-lagged are difficult to refute (Liden et al., 2025).

Rather than claiming that servant leadership research should come to an end as advocated

by Fischer et al. (2024), adjustments can be made to improve servant leadership research. First, work needs to be done to develop stronger theoretical rationale for each dimension and how the dimensions contribute toward overall servant leadership. Doing so may lead to a revision in the dimensions included. Second, scales may be adjusted to focus more on respondent episodic memory (which focuses on context-specific behavior) and less on semantic memory (which is based on perceptions of general characteristics or traits; Hansborough et al., 2021). Third, analogous to recommendations by van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) regarding transformational leadership, servant leadership researchers should design more studies that focus on specific dimensions, rather than always assessing only global or overall servant leadership. As pointed out in the outsider perspective above, leaders may vary considerably on the dimensions that they emphasize in their leadership. It is also likely that in striving to bring out the full potential in each follower, leaders may stress different dimensions with each follower. For example, one follower may need close direction and emotional healing whereas another follower's main need may be to be fully empowered. This points to the recommendation for more within-leader assessment of varying emphasis on each servant leadership dimension based on the specific needs of each follower.

Going Forward: Robert C. Liden and Daan van Knippenberg

The insider and outsider perspectives we have outlined here are the perspective of two scholars without claims that they would represent all “insiders” or “outsiders”. We believe, however, that they capture some of the key issues that servant leadership research ideally would address moving forward. In conclusion, we highlight these here.

A first issue for future research is to develop theory to more firmly establish servant leadership as a multidimensional construct or alternatively to more narrowly define servant

leadership as a unidimensional construct. Rather than focusing on being true to the dimensions identified by Greenleaf (1970), as most servant leadership researchers have attempted to do, we can give credit to Greenleaf for introducing the construct but then move on to approach its theoretical development in a more scientific, parsimonious way. A second issue our exchange of perspectives identified is the value of studying the independent and interactive influences of what are currently seen as dimensions of servant leadership. This would be valuable regardless of whether these elements of leadership are considered from the perspective of a multidimensional conceptualization of servant leadership or from the perspective of a unidimensional conceptualization of servant leadership in which these elements would not be considered servant leadership but relevant to the effects of servant leadership. A third issue our exchange of perspectives highlighted is the value of developing measures of servant leadership to be purely behavioral or alternatively to more clearly differentiate – empirically and conceptually – behavioral and perceptual elements in servant leadership theory. These three issues are interrelated in that how one is addressed feeds into how the other is addressed (e.g., theoretical development feeds into measurement development).

Addressing these issues asks that the field of servant leadership research provide a forum for alternative conceptualizations and alternative operationalizations of servant leadership and does not insist that servant leadership should be studied with one of the established measures. This also asks for some patience in the field for servant leadership research to diverge before it converges again to the degree of consensus that currently seems to characterize the field. Our hope in outlining these three “points of contention” is that it inspires the further development of servant leadership theory and research. Doing so will not only enhance the integrity of academic research on servant leadership but will inform the practice of servant leadership.

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