Review of Followership Theory and Servant Leadership Theory: Understanding How Servant Leadership Informs Followership

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Followership literature emphasizes the importance of followers to the leader-follower relationship. Leaders and followers cannot exist without each other. Burns (1978) acknowledged that leaders and followers are inseparable but perform different functions. Baker (2007) describes the leader-follower relationship as an interdependent relationship in which the follower is an active participant. Followership literature aims to change perceptions of followers as passive, sheeplike, obedient subordinates to that of active participants in the leader-follower relationship.

Crossman and Crossman (2011) pointed out that followership is often defined from the leader's perspective. According to Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten (2014), followers have been described as "recipients or moderators of the leader's influence" (p. 83). However, leaders no longer hold the "great man" status pervasive during the twentieth century. According to Collinson (2006), the essence of leadership is followership.

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Since leaders do not exist in isolation, examining the follower-leader relationship is important.

The follower-leader relationship is a mutually influential process in which the follower is an active participant. Followership complements leadership (Collinson, 2006). Greenleaf (2002) believed that servants as followers are just as important as servant-leaders. Servant leadership is one of the few follower-focused leadership theories. Traditional leadership approaches that position the leader as dominant are ineffective. Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011) described this as one of the problems within leadership theory. According to the authors, other models do not address how leadership should work cooperatively with followers. Improving organizational performance requires developing both leadership and followership skills (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). Leadership strategies that put people first are more desirable. Central to servant leadership is the follower-leader relationship. Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011) believed that servant leadership's attractiveness is its focus on serving others.

Servant leadership is an emerging leadership style. The popularity of servant leadership shows the shift to a more positive, value-based leadership style to deal with turbulent environments and changing demographics within the workplace. However, a majority of the research on servant leadership has been either conceptual or theoretical (Parris & Peachey, 2013). The authors noted that empirical research on servant leadership did not begin until 2004. Similarly, only recently has followership been given attention (Baker, 2007; Bjudstad, Thach, Thompson, & Morris, 2006; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Collinson, 2006; Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Ford & Harding, 2015; Martin, 2015; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

A review of the accumulated research on followership revealed a continued need for empirical research and a need for developed definitions. Therefore, this chapter's objectives are to describe followership from the follower's perspective and to understand how the integration of followership and servant leadership informs the follower's behavior. Collinson (2006) argued that leadership studies need to develop a broader understanding of followers' identities. Further, Avolio (2007) believed that leadership theory should consider "the dynamic interplay between

leaders and followers—for continued progress … in advancing both science and practice of leadership" (p. 25). According to Uhl-Bien et al. (2014), "the study of followership involves an investigation of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process" (p. 89). As such, this chapter's objective is to add to the followership and servant leadership literature using a followership approach. From this perspective, leadership and its outcomes are jointly constructed with followership (Oc & Bashshur, 2013). Reviewing the literature on followership and servant leadership will provide a better understanding of the follower-leader relationship.

First, the chapter discusses the method of selecting literature for the review. Next, the chapter lays a foundation by defining key concepts in followership theory. Kelley (1988, 1992) provided descriptions of exceptional or exemplary followers, which are similar to those of Greenleaf's (2002) servant-leaders. Uhl-Bien et al.'s (2014) systematic literature review provides the conceptual definitions for follower, followership, and followership theory. Also, Greenleaf's (2008) and Spear's (2004) models will be used to define servant leadership constructs. The findings of this study can underpin empirical research that examines the follower-leader relationship.

Methods

Scholarly, peer-reviewed articles and popular sources were identified for the review. No restriction was placed on publication year. However, a majority of the articles included in the review represent literature from the past seven years. Databases used included EBSCO (Business Source Complete and PsycINFO), ProQuest (ABI/INFORM Global), SAGE journals, and Google Scholar. The author conducted the search for literature using several keywords: followers, followership, followership theory, and servant leadership. The combinations of servant leadership and followership theory were also used.

Bibliographic mining enabled the identification of seminal works and other relevant studies. References were either imported or manually put into a citation manager in order to keep track of the sources.

Additionally, Nvivo11, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), helped to organize the literature. Sinkovics and Alfoldi (2012) recommended using CAQDAS to catalogue and analyze both literature and data.

The author took notes while reading the literature, which were used to create spreadsheets. Recording important elements from each article occurred in two ways. The author created a spreadsheet that identified authors, article titles, journal or book names, article types, instruments used, main theories, and author-identified keywords. Use of the spreadsheet helped to determine article similarities and differences.

Articles were chosen if the abstract included the words follower, followership, servant-leader, and servant leadership. Reviewing articles that utilize different methodologies provided empirical support to the review. Also included were nonacademic literature frequently cited within peer-reviewed literature. For example, Crossman and Crossman (2011) described Kelley (1992) as the most influential and widely quoted author of contemporary followership literature. Finally, key constructs were identified by comparing reviewed literature for similar themes and concepts. The next section identifies and defines key constructs in followership theory and servant leadership theory.

Followers, Followership, and Followership Theory

Although the terms are not synonymous, follower and subordinate have been used synonymously since the 1980s (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) described the origins of the negative perceptions of followers to leader-centric approaches. The leader-centric view focuses on leaders. This view produced stereotypes of leaders as the "motivating entity that moves and directs followers" (p. 84). Kelley (1992) acknowledged the deep-rooted follower and leader stereotypes, which make one role more desirable than the other. Baker (2007) described this as a common view of leadership in which leaders actively lead and subordinates passively obey.

According to Uhl-Bien et al. (2014), the view of managers and employees as inferior emanated from Taylor's (1911, 1934) foundational view. Dixon and Westbrook (2003) described this as the dominant theory of management, which consisted of "great men". Followers were "sheep-like" subordinates (Dixon & Westbrook, 2003, p. 19). Kelley (1992) described *sheep* as "people who are easily led and manipulated" (p. 36). Lundin and Lancaster (1990) believed in the importance of changing this misconception of the inferior, passive follower in order to nurture effective followers.

Effective followers, according to Kelley (1988, 1992), participate with enthusiasm, intelligence, and self-reliance in the pursuit of organizational goals. Effective leaders and effective followers possess the same qualities: loyalty, commitment, and caring about others. They are just operating in different roles. Kelley (1992) pointed out that the same person will be both leader and follower at different times. Effective followers practice self-management, are committed to the organization and to a purpose, build their competence, and focus their efforts for maximum impact (p. 4). Finally, effective followers are "courageous, honest, and credible" (p. 4). Effective followers can function as leaders and understand how to support the organization, the leader, and the team.

Understanding the negative connotations associated with the word *subordinate* justifies the importance of making a distinction between the terms *subordinate* and *follower*. Merriam-Webster (2009) defined *subordinate* as "placed in or occupying a lower class, rank, or position or submissive to or controlled by authority" (p. 1244). The definition implies a lower-class, submissive person. In contrast, *follower* is defined as "one in the service of another" (p. 486). *Follaziohan* is the Old High German root of follower, which means to "assist, help, succor, or minister to" (Kelley, 1992, p. 34). Being a follower signifies being a servant active in the follower-leader relationship (Blanchard, Welbourne, Gilmore, & Bullock, 2009). Followers are active partners, participants, co-leaders, and co-followers (Chaleff, 1995; Dixon & Westbrook, 2003). Followers work side by side with leaders to achieve organizational goals.

Followership and Followership Theory

Findings from reviewed literature indicate that followership is an active, relational process. Earlier definitions support the view of followers as passive and obedient. Followership from this perspective describes the leader-centric (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) process in which followers/subordinates passively follow the leader's directives and support the leaders' efforts (Bjudstad et al., 2006). Crossman and Crossman (2011) described followership as a relational role. Followers contribute to organizational goals and possess a mutually influential relationship with the leader. Additionally, Oc and Bashshur (2013) described the followership role as contributing to organizational goals. The authors stated that followership includes "followers' decisions, behaviors, and attitudes" and includes "actively and explicitly influencing leader perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, or decisions" (p. 920). This chapter, however, adopts Uhl-Bien et al.'s (2014) description of followership.

Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) agreed that followership includes followers' roles and behaviors, but followership also includes the "outcomes associated with the leadership process" (p. 96). Followership theory is the "study of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 96). The study of followership is "not the study of leadership from the follower perspective … it is the study of how followers view and enact following behaviors in relation to leaders" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 96). Constructs associated with followership theory include followership characteristics, followership behaviors, and followership outcomes, described below:

- *Followership characteristics*: characteristics that impact how one defines and enacts followership
- *Followership behaviors*: behaviors enacted from the standpoint of a follower role or in the acting of the following
- *Followership outcomes*: outcomes of followership characteristics and behaviors that may occur at the individual, relationship, and work-unit levels (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 96)

Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf is credited with coining the term *servant leadership*. Servant-leaders are servants first. Greenleaf (2002) wrote that the servant-leader concept emerged after a deep involvement with colleges and universities during the period of campus turmoil in the late 1960s and 1970s. He provided another catalyst for the emergence of the term *servant-leader*, which was Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*, with Leo, the central character, who exemplifies the servant-leader. Kelley (1992) also makes a reference to Hesse's *Journey to the East* in order to understand followership. While Greenleaf views Leo as a servant-leader, Kelley views Leo as an exemplary follower. From Greenleaf's perspective, great leaders are servants first. Kelley's perspective emphasizes the importance of exemplary followership skills. However, both believed in service and putting others first.

The servant, according to Greenleaf (2002), ensures that people's "highest priority needs are being served" (p. 151). The choice to serve first then brings "one to aspire to lead" (Greenleaf, 2008, p. 15). Those being served should, therefore, "grow as persons … become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous" (p. 15). The assumption is that those being served will become servants. Greenleaf (2002) discussed servant-leaders and servants as followers. Winston and Fields (2015) described the nature of servant leadership as going beyond one's self-interest (p. 415). Ebener and O'Connell (2010) stated that servant-leaders "transcend individual self-interest, serving others by helping them grow both professionally and personally" (p. 315). Patterson (2003) defined servant-leaders as those "leaders lead by focusing on their followers, such that the followers are the primary concern and the organization's concerns are peripheral" (p. 5). Spears (2004) described servant leadership as a "long-term transformational approach to life and work—a way of being". Servant leadership is commonly defined by its characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors (Focht & Ponton, 2015).

Greenleaf (2002) described the characteristics and behaviors of the servant-leader as showing initiative, being goal oriented, being an effective listener and communicator, having the ability to withdraw when

necessary, practicing acceptance and empathy, having vision and foresight, being aware and perceptive, and using persuasion as a source of power. Servant-leaders also "…help people heal, know the value of learning … are flexible, work hard to gain trust, are passionate about helping people reach their potential, and work hard to build community" (Boone & Makhani, 2012; Burrell & Grizzell, 2010). Other authors identified servant-leader characteristics and behaviors. For example, Focht and Ponton (2015) conducted a Delphi study which produced 12 primary servant leadership characteristics: value for people, humility, listening, trust, caring, integrity, service, empowerment, serving others' needs before their own, collaboration, love (unconditional love), and learning.

Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) identified five servant leadership behaviors: wisdom, persuasive mapping, organizational stewardship, altruistic calling, and emotional healing. Patterson (2003) created a model which identified seven servant leadership attributes and characteristics: demonstrates *agapao* love; acts with humility; is altruistic; is trusting; empowers followers; is visionary for the follower; and is service oriented. Winston's (2003) follower-to-leader model of servant leadership identifies seven attributes: trust, empowerment, vision, altruism, intrinsic motivation, commitment, and service.

Spears (2004) extracted ten servant-leader characteristics from Greenleaf's original writing. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the characteristics, which are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. According to Parris and Peachey (2013), research supports various servant leadership models (Boroski & Greif, 2009; Crippen, 2004; Crippen & Wallin, 2008; Patterson, 2003; Spears, 2004; Sturm, 2009; Winston, 2003). The scope of this chapter does not allow presenting an exhaustive list of the various theoretical frameworks, measurements, and conceptual models.

In order to be effective, followers must learn about the organization, the leader, and co-followers. Oc and Bashshur (2013) posited that followers' beliefs, traits, and perceptions drive how they construe leadership and are, therefore, important to the leadership process. Some common attributes in followership and servant leadership literature include service, trust, and commitment. The next section discusses these attributes.

Table 1 Spears' (2004) ten characteristics of the servant-leader

1. Listening	Communication and decision-making skills need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening to others.
2. Empathy	Understands and empathizes with others. Assumes the good intentions of coworkers and does not reject them as people.
3. Healing	Recognizes that they (servant-leaders) have an opportunity to help make whole those with whom they come in contact.
4. Awareness	General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader. Understands issues involving ethics and values. Views most situations from a more integrated, holistic position.
5. Persuasion	Primary reliance on persuasion rather than positional authority in making decisions within an organization. Effective at building consensus within groups.
6. Conceptualization	Seeks to nurture their abilities to "dream great dreams". Thinks beyond day-to-day realities. Seeks a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day focused approach.
7. Foresight	Enables servant-leaders to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences of a decision for the future. It is also deeply rooted within the intuitive mind.
8. Stewardship	Assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others. Emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion rather than control.
9. Commitment to the growth of people	Believes that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. Committed to the growth of each and every individual within the institution Recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything possible to nurture the growth of employees.
10. Building community	Seeks to identify some means for building community among those who work within a given institution.

Note: Spears extracted the ten characteristics from Greenleaf's original writings
Adapted from "Practicing Servant Leadership," by L. C. Spears (2004), *Leader to Leader, 34*, 8–9

Servants as Followers

Servant-leaders are servants first. They serve followers by helping them grow personally and professionally (Ebener & O'Connell, 2010). Greenleaf (2008) provided a way to measure servant leadership's effect on

follower outcomes by asking, "do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely to become servant-leaders?" (p. 15) Leaders must also be trustworthy, competent, and committed. Servant-leaders should produce more servants who are committed to service, trustworthy, and competent.

Followers seek the good of and support the leader, organization, and co-followers. Moreover, followers are influential and able to make decisions. Kelley (1992) asserted that exemplary followers understand the leader's goals, needs, and constraints. Trust is a prerequisite for an effective follower-leader relationship. Trust and loyalty hold the follower-leader relationship together (Ford & Harding, 2015). The follower-leader relationship is a mutually influential relationship that requires both to trust and to be trustworthy. Followers must have confidence in the leader's values in order to develop trust (Greenleaf, 2008). Achieving organizational goals requires that the leader and follower share a common purpose (Baker, 2007). Both the follower and leader must understand followership expectations and requirements.

A trusting leader empowers followers. Servant-leaders provide greater autonomy among followers (Greenleaf, 2008). Empowered followers have the freedom to serve, which can improve job performance (Bartram & Casimir, 2007). Ebener and O'Connell (2010) recommended using the following empowering strategies: delegating tasks, decision-making, and seeking advice from others. Leaders can also empower followers by "effectively listening, making people feel significant, putting emphasis on teamwork, and valuing love and equality" (Patterson, 2003, p. 23; Russell & Stone, 2002). Consequently, empowering strategies can lead to greater levels of commitment, improved work quality, more innovative behaviors, and increased job satisfaction among followers (Ebener & O'Connell, p. 315; Yukl & Becker, 2006). Other outcomes include improved performance and increased creativity (Ford & Harding, 2015).

Followers take responsibility not only for themselves but also for the organization (Dixon & Westbrook, 2003). They are committed to an organization and strive to do what is best for the organization. Ebener and O'Connell (2010) describe this as self-development, which means that followers take responsibility for and are active in their own growth and development. Although followers are committed to the organization

and the leader, they may question decisions that do not appear to be in the best interest of the organization (Kelley, 1992). Incidentally, followers are not afraid to provide honest feedback to the leader. Followers can, therefore, affect leader behavior (Oc & Bashshur, 2013). Kelley (1988) pointed out that some followers can be more influential than others. Elements such as trust, commitment, and service can lead to higher levels of service toward the leader (Winston, 2003) and the organization.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to review followership theory and servant leadership theory. Early leadership research "ignored" followers (Baker, 2007) or viewed followers from the leader's perspective. Although the view of followership is changing, a review of the literature indicates a need for continued research. Therefore, the aim of this chapter was to discuss the follower-leader relationship from the follower's perspective. Early leadership literature created the misconception of followers as passive and sheep-like (Dixon & Westbrook, 2003; Kelley, 1992). However, recent research shows that followers are actively engaged in the follower-leader relationship (Baker, 2007; Bjudstad et al., 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The follower-leader relationship is a mutually influential relationship (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). Therefore, organizations must invest in developing both leaders and followers. Followers must understand how to support an organization's vision and mission, leadership, and co-followers.

Building on extant literature, this chapter identified and defined constructs relevant to followership and servant leadership. Effective followers participate with enthusiasm, intelligence, and self-reliance in the pursuit of organizational goals (Kelley, 1988, 1992). Followers are active participants in the leadership process, co-partners with the leader, and co-followers. In addition to defining a follower, the chapter also defined followership using Uhl-Bien et al.'s (2014) definition. Followership includes followers' roles and behaviors as well as the "outcomes associated with the leadership process" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 96). Servant-leaders are servants first (Greenleaf, 2008). Although they occupy leadership roles, servant-leaders' inclination is to serve. Servant-leader is

an ambiguous term; however, research shows that servant leadership is a viable leadership strategy.

This chapter also identified common themes among followership and servant leadership. First, Kelley (1992) described following as a way of serving. Chaleff (1995) agreed that followership is based on service. Servant-leaders identify as servants first. Other common themes included trust and commitment. Greenleaf (2002) believed that servants as followers are just as important as servant-leaders.

The servant-leader and follower relationship must be built on trust. Followers want to serve leaders that are trustworthy. According to Ford and Harding (2015), trust and loyalty hold the follower-leader relationship together. Further, trust is necessary for followers to have confidence in the leader. Similarly, the follower must also be trustworthy. Trustworthiness is built through honesty, credibility, and competence.

Next, a trusting leader empowers followers. Greenleaf (2008) pointed out that servant-leaders provide autonomy among followers. Empowerment leads to commitment to the organization and to the leader. Other outcomes include improved work quality, innovation, creativity, and job satisfaction.

In sum, a review of the literature suggests that servant-leaders produce more servants. Following is a way of serving as stated by Kelley (1992). Servants as followers are committed to the organization and the leader, are actively engaged in the follower-leadership relationship, and care for the leader and co-followers. Servants as followers take responsibility for their development.

There are limitations to this review. The review presents limited criticisms of followership theory and servant leadership theory. Other leadership theories were not presented as a way to compare and contrast servant leadership. Servant leadership is often compared to transformational and spiritual leadership in the literature. These alternate views would allow researchers to view similarities, differences, strengths, and weaknesses.

Finally, this was not an exhaustive review. Small quantities of literature comprise the review. Future research should conduct a systematic review of followership and servant leadership. More research is needed that examines the follower-leadership relationship from the follower's perspective.

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