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## The Motivation to Serve as a Corner Stone of Servant Leadership

Peter Sun

### Introduction

What motivates a leader to serve? To transcend beyond self and serve the legitimate needs of others. What motivates them to seek the growth and development of others, to be more effective and better servant leaders? Graham (1995) suggests that servant leaders are at the post-conventional moral stage, and therefore exhibit moral behaviors that incorporate consideration of others. Sun (2013) extends this perspective by suggesting that servant leaders incorporate a well-defined servant identity, and hence are motivated to exhibit behaviors that align with their salient servant identity. This chapter seeks to examine the motivational foundation for servant behaviors by incorporating these ego, moral, identity, and cognitive perspectives, to understand what drives servant behaviors.

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P. Sun (✉)

Centre for Enterprise & Leadership, Waikato Management School,  
University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

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The chapter also challenges our assumption of self-sacrificing altruism, and examines the possibility that leaders can exhibit servant behaviors from a self-serving angle. In a recent study, Owens et al. (2015) show how narcissism and humility – a key dimension of servant leadership behavior – can co-exist; and such paradoxical co-existence is in fact beneficial for both leaders and their followers. Does this point to different shades of servant leaders, and if so, what motivational foundation drives these shades of behaviors?

## The Motivation to Serve as a Corner Stone of Servant Leadership

‘Servant leadership,’ coined from two paradoxical words ‘servant’ and ‘leader,’ has seen an increase in interest in recent years. Of all the positive forms of leadership such as authentic, ethical, and spiritual, servant leadership explains larger performance variance over and beyond the most widely researched transformational leadership style (see Hoch et al. [in press](#), for a meta-analysis).

What distinguishes servant leadership from all other forms of positive leadership style? In his theoretical review of servant leadership, van Dierendonck (2011) suggests that although servant leadership style shares some similarities with other positive forms of leadership, none of them combine the drive to be a leader with a focus on serving followers’ needs. In their recent meta-analysis, Hoch et al. ([in press](#)) suggest that their propensity to serve may be the factor that distinguishes servant leaders from all other forms of leadership style. Neubert et al. (2016) state that ‘what makes servant leadership distinctive from other forms of leadership is its unique focus on other-centered service’ (p. 3). Robert Greenleaf who brought servant leadership into workplaces says that the servant leader is servant first (Greenleaf 1970). Given the exclusive focus on serving followers’ legitimate needs is the distinguishing factor, what is the motivational foundation for serving? The next section describes servant leaders’ motivation to serve, and uses adult development theory to explain how such motivation evolves.

## Motivational Foundation for Serving

An individual's motivation for particular behaviors stems from his/her identity (Day et al. 2009). Instead of having a singular identity, an individual's self-construct is a 'multi-faceted and dynamic cognitive structure consisting of all of a person's *identities*' (Campbell et al. 1996; Obodaru 2012, p. 36, italics added). These identities can take many forms, defining a person by their personal characteristics, their memberships in groups and organizations, their personal roles, and so on. An important identity is the self-identity, which is the identity that relates to self and relationships with others. Such a self-identity is constituted by attributes, which are evaluative standards that individuals cognitively engage with when triggered by situations and context (Hannah et al. 2009). This ensures that behaviors that a person enacts align with their particular self-identity. Identities are therefore people's desire to be self-expressive, that is, to express their feelings and values (Shamir et al. 1993).

Sun (2013) argues that a particular self-identity, at the root of servant leadership, is the self-identity of a servant. It is this self-identity that is the foundation for the motivation to serve (MTS) others (Sun 2013). Attributes such as a calling to serve, humility, empathy, and love are the evaluative standards constituting such a servant identity (Sun 2013). Such an identity is what drives servant leaders to want to serve first.

It is important to distinguish between MTS and motivation to lead (MTL). Like MTS, the MTL can stem from a leader self-identity. Individuals who have the desire to lead, sees him or herself as a leader in most situations, thinks that leadership is ingrained in them by nature, has a strong self-identity as a leader. Chan and Drasgow (2001) refer to this aspect of MTL as affective-identity MTL. However, unlike MTS, MTL does not focus on those who are being led. Rather, the focus is on the leader—whether the leader will personally benefit by leading (i.e., 'Noncalculative MTL') or whether it is a duty or obligation to lead when called upon to do so (i.e., 'Social-Normative MTL') (Chan and Drasgow 2001).

A fruitful direction for future research is to investigate the dynamics of the relationship between the MTS and MTL bases for servant leaders. Servant leaders' natural desire is to serve first; however, to take on a lead-

ership role is a conscious choice if it affords the platform to serve the legitimate needs of others (Greenleaf 1970). What drives this conscious choice to lead? Is it driven by a calling and duty to lead (i.e., higher 'Social-Normative')? Will servant leaders who aspire to lead be less likely to consider the personal cost of leading (i.e., they have a higher 'Noncalculative' MTL)? There are no studies that the author is aware of consider these dynamics. The only study incorporating MTL is the research done by Lacroix and Verdorfer (2017). Instead of considering the dynamics between MTS and MTL, this study shows how followers' core self-evaluation mediates the relationship between their managers' servant leadership behaviors and their (i.e., followers') affective-identity MTL and Noncalculative MTL.

Because MTS links to self-identity (Sun 2013), the MTS will evolve with ego development as identity formation is an important component of adult development (Moshman 2003), in which a highly organized and principled structure of self-conception evolves (Day et al. 2009). The section to follow briefly explains the adult development stages. The relationship with servant leadership will also be unpacked.

## Adult Development Stages

The literature on constructive development suggests that adults undergo development stages through personally relevant life experiences (McCauley et al. 2006). McCauley et al. (2006) summarizing the constructive development state that *'there are identifiable patterns of meaning making that people share in common with one another; these are variously referred to as stages, orders of consciousness, ways of knowing, levels of development, organizing principles, or orders of development... orders of development unfold in a specific invariant sequence, with each successive order transcending and including the previous order... in general, people do not regress; once an order of development has been constructed, the previous order loses its organizing function, but remains as a perspective that can now be reflected upon'* (p. 636). The constructive development moves beyond the study of children to include lifelong adult development; it moves from a study of cognition to include emotions; it goes beyond external influences on development to development through internal experiences; and it

provides understanding of the processes involved in bringing the stages of development to being (Kegan 1980; McCauley et al. 2006). In short, adult development is about construction of meaning making that takes into account individuals' emotional, personal, and their social worlds (Kegan 1980).

With increasing experiences (that usually come with age), leaders tend to take on behaviors that are transformational and exhibit ethics of care if they are driven to leave a positive legacy behind for the succeeding generation (Zacher et al. 2011)—an attitude of servant leaders. It is therefore more common to see servant leadership behaviors that embrace an altruistic focus on others in those leaders who have matured in their moral and self-development (Graham 1995).

Using Kegan (1980) constructive development theory that explains the motivational foundation for adult behaviors, this chapter expands on our understanding of what underpins servant leadership behaviors. Kegan's constructive development framework has been used to study the foundation of transformational and transactional leadership (e.g., Kuhnert and Lewis 1987), as well as research on leader development (e.g., McCauley et al. 2006). It is a theoretical framework that explains the formation of self-identities that has relevance to moral leadership such as servant leadership (Day et al. 2009). For this reason, Kegan's framework is a useful theoretical base for this study.

When progressing through the stages of development, the deep structures of the person's meaning-making system evolves to developing a distinction between self and others. Making the distinction between self and others, and the meaning of its interrelationships, involves the distinction between what is 'subject' and what is 'object.' The 'subject' is the structure (or the lens) through which the individual makes sense of the world. It is those underlying beliefs and assumptions, the difficult-to-examine value system that is central to the individual self-construct, which govern meaning making. The 'object' is what is consciously manipulated. Kegan argues that for development to occur, it is essential that what is 'subject' must surface to become the conscious object of manipulation.

Kegan (1980) proposes six stages of development (starting with Stage 0). Of these, the Stages 2 to 5 link to leadership (Kuhnert and Lewis 1987; McCauley et al. 2006). Kegan's Stage 2 (Imperial) demonstrates an

individual whose subconscious focus is self (i.e., self-needs, self-interests, and wishes). The self is the subject. The interpersonal relationships become the conscious object of manipulation for purposes of self-gain. Leaders at Stage 2 exercise lower order transactional behaviors (Kuhnert and Lewis 1987). At the extreme, they could be narcissistic, exercising pseudo-transformational leadership behaviors.

When they progress to Stage 3 (Interpersonal), the interpersonal relationship becomes the subject, while they consciously manipulate self as the object (i.e., self-needs, interests, and wishes) in order to satisfy interpersonal mutuality. Such leaders tend to conform to social expectations, and their leadership effectiveness derives from being prototypical of their group. At this stage, the individual is able to integrate and regulate the way they work with others. Kegan (1980) suggests that this is the base stage needed for a person's employability. As they progress to Stage 4 (Institutional), their autonomous self becomes the subject. They consciously manipulate interpersonal relationship, distinguish the opinions and actions of others, and are subject to their own internal compass and ideology. At Stage 5 (Interindividual), the individual is able to hold self as the object of manipulation, and hence better suited to hold contradictions between different belief systems and ideologies. They develop a self-transforming mind.

Other studies have come up with a similar approach to that of Kegan. In line with Kegan's six stages of consciousness, Torbert and colleagues have developed their own constructive-developmental stages. They suggest seven stages that are relevant for leadership: Diplomat, Expert, Achiever, Individualist, Strategist, and Alchemist (Rooke and Torbert 2005). In a review of constructive-developmental theories relevant to leadership, McCauley et al. (2006) integrated Kegan's (1982), Torbert's (1987), and Kohlberg's (1969) stage theories, and suggested three main sense-making stages: Dependent, Independent, and Interdependent. The three orders of sense making have been utilized by Valcea et al. (2011) to theorize how leaders and followers can progress in their development order through their interactions with each other. The three orders of sense making by McCauley et al. (2006) closely align with Kegan's Interpersonal, Institutional, and Interindividual stages of development, where self and others become increasingly the focus of change and transformation.

## Servant Leadership ‘Base Camp’

Stage 2 is not the stage where the motivation to serve can start. At Stage 3, serving others can begin, provided an appropriate serving culture exists in the organization. Liden et al. (2014) describe serving culture ‘*as a work environment in which participants share the understanding that the behavioral norms and expectations are to prioritize the needs of others above their own and to provide help and support to others*’ (p. 1437). It is the perceived collective behavior, and is set as an expected behavior of the work unit as well as of the formal leaders (Liden et al. 2014). If the expectation of others is to engage in serving behaviors, the individual at Stage 3 will be able to manipulate self-expression to engage in such behaviors, as it is a collective expectation.

Another culture that can be a collective expectation is a culture of humility. Humility is a foundational virtue for serving, and in fact many studies on servant leadership regard humility as the essential characteristic needed to serve as a leader (e.g., Sun 2013). Humble servant leaders are able to set aside their position, status, and talents, in order to utilize the talents of others (Dennis and Bocarnea 2005; Van Dierendonck 2011; Van Dierendonck and Nuijten 2011). They are able to keep their position and capability in proper perspective (Patterson 2003). They are willing to be held accountable by their subordinates, receive criticism and feedback, and even retreat to the background when tasks are accomplished (Van Dierendonck 2011; Van Dierendonck and Nuijten 2011). Such exercise of humility by servant leaders, through social learning, will filter through to the culture of the unit they are leading.

Humility has two dimensions: intrapersonal and interpersonal. The intrapersonal dimension necessitates a balanced internal processing of personal strengths and weaknesses, while the interpersonal dimension is to seek to learn from others (Owens et al. 2013). It is the interpersonal dimension that is the expressed humility and can exist as an organizational culture. Such expressed humility is seen in the organization when:

- Individuals within the organization are encouraged to be transparent about their personal limit, seek feedback, and acknowledge mistakes, that is, a culture where ‘seeing oneself accurately’ is encouraged

- Individuals within the organization readily know and acknowledge the strengths and skill sets of others, and not be threatened to utilize others' skills.
- Individuals in the organization are teachable by showing a willingness to learn, receive feedback, and receive new ideas.

A culture of serving and humility are boundary conditions for servant leadership behaviors to emerge in Stage 3 of adult development. Individuals at Stage 3 of their development can be socially conditioned to exercise serving and humility when it is an expectation within the organization. An example of social conditioning is seen in productive narcissists (Owens et al. 2015). Productive narcissists can temper their desire for self-enhancement (i.e., to temper their desire to inflate their self-worth), and look for the strengths of others. Such contradictory behaviors are possible and can exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith and Lewis 2011). Leaders at Stage 3 of their ego development can be socially conditioned to manipulate their inflated sense of self-worth and look at strengths of others because that is the collective expectation.

The majority of adults, unfortunately, tend to plateau at this stage of development. Holt (1980) in his study of US adult samples shows that majority of adults can be categorized as 'conformists.' As conformists, they tend to place high value of being accepted by their reference group, and have the capacity to delay and redirect impulses to conform to social expectations. They place emphasis on stereotypes and show beginning stages of self-awareness. However, at this Stage 3, if utilizing others' strengths is disadvantageous to self, then it is likely they would resort to some self-enhancement tendencies, thereby vacillating between expressed humility and self-enhancement behaviors. This is the 'base camp' of the motivational foundation for serving.

### **Servant Leadership 'Mid Camp'**

At Stage 4, the identity of a servant evolves as an important self-construct. Self-identity is a powerful motivating factor for engaging in self-congruent behaviors. How does such a 'serving' identity evolve? Is it driven by a higher sense of calling to serve (Sendjaya and Cooper 2011; Sun 2013)?



Does it evolve out of a spiritual experience, as, for example, Christians are asked to emulate their Lord Jesus Christ, who can be regarded as the greatest servant of all (Sun 2013)? It can be argued that the basis of serving arises out of one's self-concept as a servant and such an identity will have attributes of self-transcendence (Sun 2013).

The transition from 'base camp' to 'mid camp' of servant leadership is important. From being socially conditioned to display servant leadership behaviors to expressing behaviors that are congruent to self-identity, this transitioning marks an important step change. How does this step change occur? Servant leadership literature is largely silent about this. Adult development literature speaks of the need for personally relevant life experiences, cognitive development through learning and experiences, as well as immersing in different cultural contexts as important triggers for transition to occur (Kegan 1982; McCauley et al. 2006). Development movement occurs when complex experiences reveal the limitation of current ways of constructing meaning (McCauley et al. 2006). The role of development experiences cannot be ignored, as it has an impact on leadership development (Howard and Irving 2014). There is therefore a need for literature to research this important area of transition as it can be of practical significance for servant leadership development.

The existing literature implicitly conceptualizes servant leaders as belonging to this Stage of development. Literature argues that servant leadership behaviors cannot be normalized and proceduralized and taught as a technique that needs practicing. For this reason, Greenleaf (1970, 1977) conceptualized servant leadership behaviors as a way of life rather than a management technique to be learnt and practiced (Parris and Peachey 2013).

Such a servant orientation, a way of life of the servant leader, can have a positive impact on others through social learning. Empirical research has shown that there will be a trickle-down effect of servant behaviors through social learning (Ehrhart 2004; Hu and Liden 2011; Neubert et al. 2016). For example, servant leadership behaviors of nurse managers encourage nurses to engage in helping one another (Neubert et al. 2016).

Although studies have shown that servant leadership behaviors will trickle down to their teams through social learning and enhance team effectiveness, can it have an overall positive impact on the organization?

Servant leadership can enhance the organizational citizenship behaviors of individual team members (OCB-I) due to their trust and relational bond with the servant leader. It can also enhance OCB toward their team members through provision of pro-social support (Liden et al. 2014). However, will it effectively translate to OCB toward the organization? Unlike transformational leadership that encourages individuals to go beyond self for the sake of the organization, servant behaviors encourage relational-orientated extra role behaviors at the interpersonal level.

Literature does point to this possible downside of servant leadership for the organization. *Servant leaders...serve followers as an end in themselves—their needs and development takes a priority over those of the organizations* (Sendjaya and Cooper 2011, p. 418). Although some literature argue that this aspect of servant leadership ensures organizational growth as a long-term by-product (e.g., Stone et al. 2004), others do not necessarily agree. Some argue that servant leaders are not effective in navigating an organization in times of change (e.g., Humphreys 2005; Parolini et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2004). This possible limitation has been noted in previous research, where the servant leaders' preoccupation in serving the needs of followers can come at the detriment of the organization (Sun 2013). It can therefore be argued that an institutional servant identity can hinder the servant leader from engaging with multiple and conflicting ideologies that often come when dealing at the organizational level. This stage is referred to as the 'mid camp' of servant leadership. For leaders to engage with multiple ideologies at the organizational level and yet engage with servant behaviors at the individual level, requires servant leaders to be at a different stage of their development—the servant leadership 'summit' stage.

### **Servant Leadership 'Summit'**

It is at Stage 5 of development that servant leaders have the motivational, as well as cognitive, foundation to balance the paradox of 'serving' (at the individual level) and 'leading' (at the organizational level). A quick review of some recent empirical studies sheds some interesting insights. Van Dierendonck et al. (2014) show servant leadership behaviors significantly

relate to meeting psychological needs of individuals. Another study by Panaccio et al. (2015) shows that servant leadership fosters higher psychological empowerment in their followers. Servant leaders, because of their dealings at the individual level, foster high social exchange with their followers. Their communication exchanges with individual followers are in keeping with others' relational norms (Abu Bakar and McCann 2016), and hence fosters high quality relationships. Such high quality social exchange results in higher psychological contract (Panaccio et al. 2015) and higher LMX (Newman et al. 2017). While servant leadership significantly relates to meeting psychological needs of followers, the association with leadership effectiveness was much lower (van Dierendonck et al. 2014). In contrast, van Dierendonck and colleagues found that transformational leadership was significantly associated (with a much higher unstandardized coefficient) to leadership effectiveness and not psychological needs of followers. These studies show tension for servant leaders to keep an optimum balance of serving psychological needs of followers while maintaining leadership effectiveness at the organization level. How does a servant leader ensure that while serving others in order to enable them to grow in various aspects of their lives, they also simultaneously optimize the long- and short-term goals of the organizations? Maintaining such a tension is the 'summit' of effective servant leadership.

Why is there a tension? Investing in skill development of individuals, especially when there is a clear line of sight with organizational benefit, is an easy decision for leaders to make. Effective leaders are good at recognizing and supporting such employee development. This is the basis of the 'individualized consideration' component of transformational leadership (Bass 1985, 1998). Leaders are able to look at individual skills and competencies, and structure personally relevant experiences and development. However, this clear line of sight blurs when dealing with individual needs that are not directly skill or competency related. Investing time to consider individuals' psychological needs comes at a personal cost to the leader. Especially when leaders are time-poor and resources are scarce, there is tension in investing in such individual needs. In fact, one reason why women prefer not to pursue leadership within organizations is the high personal cost involved, and its detrimental effect on work-life balance (Roebuck et al. 2013).

What about those marginalized within the organization? Those marginalized in the organization can be misfits due to various reasons: does not fit into the culture or personality of the organization; skills and competencies are increasingly irrelevant. For servant leaders to manage such people out of the organization, but in doing so to ensure their individual needs are met is a tension (Sun 2013).

Another tension worth noting is when to let go of servant behaviors. Exhibiting servant behaviors are not necessarily beneficial to all types of followers. For example, followers having extroverted personalities (Panaccio et al. 2015)—such personality characteristics are linked to leadership and leadership emergence and having a proactive personality (Newman et al. 2017)—are less dependent on their leader's servant behaviors for psychological contract fulfillment (Panaccio et al. 2015) or higher quality social exchange (Newman et al. 2017). In fact, a high level of servant behaviors can be detrimental to the social exchange between the servant leader and such followers. The capacity for the servant leader to recognize the possibility of such a detrimental effect, and to restrain certain servant behaviors, comes with greater cognitive and social intelligence. To display servant behaviors differentially, depending on the type of followers, may create some sense of injustice. Understanding these tensions and ensuring behavioral complexity for the benefit of the organization and the individual is the capacity of the 'summit' of servant leadership.

A recent study points to the need for structure, as a boundary condition, for servant leadership effectiveness (Neubert et al. 2016). This study finds that under conditions of high structure (note: structure is a substitute for leadership), the impact of servant leadership on various follower outcomes such as creative behavior is stronger (Neubert et al. 2016). Structure provides substitute for leadership. When there is low structure, servant leaders and followers expend much time to deal with ambiguity, and this reduces the impact of their leadership behaviors. This study shows that the ability to initiate structures that can act as positive moderators of their leadership behavior is a capability required of servant leaders. Initiating structure is a requirement of effective leadership, but existing literature does not include this as a requirement of servant leaders.

What do these discussions on the servant leadership ‘summit’ tell us? They tell us that servant leaders must be able to deal with multiple—at times conflicting—identities while holding an institutional servant identity. To manage individuals out of the organization, to engage in behavioral complexity, to initiate structure for the organization are leadership behaviors that come from a leader rather than servant identity. It tells us that the servant leadership ‘summit’ is a ‘full-range’ of leadership behaviors driven by several identities of which the servant identity is a salient and valued one. Structural symbolic interactionism tells us that self-identities can be arranged in hierarchy of salience (Shamir et al. 1993). Instead of the hierarchy of salience being fixed, the salience of the self-identities can change depending on the situation and context. Such changes can happen in relatively short periods (Sun 2013), enabling the servant leader to deal with multiple and at times conflicting situations.

Future research needs to look at the various personal resources required by the leader engaging in servant leadership ‘summit.’ It requires high cognitive and behavioral complexity as well as morality that are able to deal with conflicting ideologies. This comes from servant leaders who are at Stage 5 of their constructive development.

## Conclusion

Having looked at the motivational foundation of servant leadership, how does it distinguish this style of leadership from other positive forms of leadership? The identity of serving that translates to congruent behaviors is the distinguishing factor. The motivational foundation to serve will reflect in different ways, depending on their stages of development. At the base camp, ‘serving’ occurs as long as it simultaneously enhances the self-enhancement needs of the one who serves. It is conditioned by social expectations. At mid camp, self-sacrifice occurs, but is limited to the followers they serve. At summit, ‘serving’ extends to other constituents, beyond the followers closest to the servant leader. They are able to balance different perspectives and challenges, with the required capability to navigate through such complexities. In essence, their serving is universal rather than follower-focused, and this is what distinguishes servant leaders from other styles of leadership.

This discussion points to the need for future studies on servant leadership to consider the development stages of the leader and their motivation to serve at these stages. It is likely, as argued in this chapter, that serving behaviors can come from a self-enhancement motive as long as it is a social expectation. However, as the servant leader grows along his/her development trajectory, his/her serving behavior will extend beyond self, to those who are closest, to other stakeholders. They are able to embrace different ideologies and work across individuals and organization. Therefore, investigating human values that constitute the servant leader maybe a fruitful direction for future research. By examining the human values that underpin servant leaders, we develop a better understanding of which attributes constitute their self-identity. For example, examining the basic individual values (Schwartz et al. 2012); it can be argued that ‘Universalism concern’ can be that component of value that will distinguish servant leadership from other leadership styles. It goes beyond those who are closest to embrace the larger constituents. In terms of practical application, it points to the need for those engaging in servant leadership development to consider the development stages of the leader.

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