Chapter 5
Servant Leadership: Operationalising an Oxymoron

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Introduction

While it is a rare leadership theory that does not occasion some controversy and debate, servant leadership has generated more than its fair share (Schroeder 2016). First propounded in the 1970s by Greenleaf (1977)—who based it on his own intuitions and experiences—it has, ever since, remained somewhat conceptually elastic. Even its name has been seen as oxymoronic, bringing together, as it does, two practices—those of servant and leader—that are not an obvious pairing (Ragnarsson et al. 2018). Never settled has been the question of whether or not it should be hyphenated: 'servant-leadership' conveys the notion of leadership in a servant style, whereas 'servant leadership' would be leadership by a servant. When commentators have justified their advocacy of it by reminding their readers that it has been the preferred style of many a religious guru, they have faced criticism for not speaking on the level of managers and executives who are looking for a grounded and readily implementable programme (van Dierendonck 2011).

Compounding the problems are the cultural and moral frames around Greenleaf's ideas. Titled 'The Servant as Leader', his seminal essay (Greenleaf 1977) is specific in its ethical perspective, its chief interest being in how those who identify primarily as servants can be leaders, not with how leaders can adopt the attitudes and approaches of servants. It is axiomatic for Greenleaf—and those who echo his views—that being a servant precedes and predates being a leader (Cerit 2009). Such ideas may come across as novel in the capitalist, competitive and results-driven society of the USA, in which they were developed (Stewart 2012), but, elsewhere, their reception would quite possibly be very different.

Happily, in educational terms, the matter is quickly dealt with, most schools around the world resembling each other in terms of organisation and leadership—or,

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if not, in facing many of the same struggles and challenges (Stewart 2013). Still, the slipperiness of the concept per se cannot be completely ignored. Indeed, its often-cited elements (Stewart 2017) offer a description, but not, in and of themselves, a clear line of demarcation between it and other forms of leadership. Most lists consist of listening skills, empathy, a capacity to heal, awareness, persuasiveness, an ability to conceptualise, foresight, stewardship, a commitment to the growth of others and a focus on building communities (Spears 1998; Crippen and Willows 2019). The major theme of these is that a servant leader has a powerful follower-orientation (Russell and Stone 2002) and a desire to create professional or learning environments based on wellness and trust: 'healing' should be taken literally as indicating a concern for the physical and psychological health of group or organisational members.

Eva et al. (2019) distils the characteristics to their three essential components: motive, mode, and mindset. The first refers to the leader's desire to serve others, the second the individualised nature of such service and the third a willingness to place followers within the context of broader community development. From these, a definition is arrived at that almost entirely disregards the leader's own needs in favour of those of his or her followers. Eliot (2020) suggests that servant leaders are tasked with helping others to grow. Reinke (2004) emphasises stewardship, making of the servant leader a trustee of an organisation, caring for it through service and self-abnegation, if not self-sacrifice. For Blanchard (1998), a servant leader recognises the limits of his or her expertise and empowers followers.

Most definitions are incomplete in their own ways. The streak of idealism in writings on the topic is highly evocative but tends to obscure details about how to operationalise the given features. It could, moreover, be argued that those features are commonplace—what makes them peculiar to servant leadership? Greenleaf (1977) gives little guidance, since, in much of his writing, he talks solely about 'leadership', the 'servant' part being assumed. In finding a suitable definition, that of Canavesi and Minelli (2022) provides a good basis: servant leadership is leadership of which the very purpose is the fulfilment of the needs of followers, customers, and other stakeholders. Such fulfilment is not merely a by-product of other purposes—such as maximising profit or meeting organisational goals—it is the priority for the leader.

Whether, and in what ways, this is applicable to educational settings as a driver for improvement is the substance of this chapter, which begins by considering servant leadership's role in addressing issues facing twenty-first century teachers and learners. It then goes on to look at how the servant approach compares to, and aligns with, other leadership theories. Next comes an examination of servant leadership's current and potential positions within educational organisations. Finally, a model is proposed that will allow for the full operationalisation of servant leadership within schools, colleges, and universities.

Servant Leadership and Twenty-First Century Educational Challenges

Despite its apparent vagueness, servant leadership enjoys growing prominence in the literature, mainly because of the rapidity, and profundity, of the changes through which global education is currently going. Calls for fresh and imaginative thinking are both legion and urgent. According to the OECD (Schleicher 2012), the old order of conformity, memorization and fixed knowledge in learning is giving way to a world in which adaptability, an orientation towards continuous improvement and an ability to negotiate multiple realities are the skill set of the successful pupil, student, or worker. With many of the functions of a traditionally-educated mind outsourced to Google, 'soft' or 'transferable' skills—such as communication and teamworking (Matteson et al. 2016)—are gaining popularity as fixtures on the modern curriculum. Added to this is increasing diversity among learners, necessitating ever-more targeted and personalised educational experiences (Forghani-Arani et al. 2019). Justice in education has come to be seen less as meeting an overall standard, than responding to individual's perceptions of fairness (Kauppila et al. 2022).

Recent writing on servant leadership has attempted to rise to these challenges. Sims (2018), for example, argues that a servant leader should possess 'diversity intelligence'. Proposed as a new and fundamental feature of servant leadership, it resonates with the conventional emphasis on empathy (Bauer et al. 2019) and the requirement for the connective tissue between servant leaders and their followers to include an awareness of cultural and individual contexts, bolstered by meanings co-created and goals mutually met (Abbas et al. 2020). That such a practice promotes in schools and colleges a culture of 'deep learning'—in which emotional healing and reflection are significant parts of the academic mix—has been demonstrated by research (Shafai 2021).

None of this is to suggest that servant leadership is the cure for every ill. Gonaim (2019) has found that servant leaders can be perceived as weak and ineffectual by their followers and that spending time on the needs of individuals delays the attainment of team or organisational goals. Other authors have noted a passivity in servant leaders—to the extent that it is difficult to believe that they would aspire to leadership roles in the first place (Verdorfer 2016). Inconsistencies in the effect of servant leadership on followers have been identified by some studies (Ghasemy et al. 2022).

Perhaps the biggest query is around the basic characteristics of servant leadership, which are more applicable to people than processes and so—as the above referenced sources would seem to indicate—are arguably less concerned with leadership than leaders. Servant leadership can, then, be categorised under philosophy, or attitude of mind, rather than practice (Trompenaars and Voerman 2009). The distinction may seem like a fine one, but it does mean that, when siting servant leadership within education, the focus ought to be on how it can potentially work under, and with, other approaches, enriching them, rather than standing alone as an all-embracing prescription for action in its own right.

Servant Leadership in Context

Servant and Transformational Leadership

In exploring the question of how servant leadership relates to other theories, transformational suggests itself as most relevant (Taylor et al. 2007). The attributes of transformational leadership as usually identified (Ismail 2018)—individualised attention, intellectual stimulation, idealised influence, and inspirational motivation—map well against those of servant leadership (Mehdinezhad and Nouri 2016). Likewise, the requirement for servant leaders to influence others, develop communities and anticipate future directions, finds echoes in the work of transformational leaders. That the success of both servant and transformational leadership is ultimately located in follower motivation (Bush 2003) is an important connection between the two forms.

That said, the differences are surprisingly stark. At the heart of servant leadership is the absence of power, humility filling the resulting gap (Sousa and van Dierendonck 2017). This is not so with the transformational style, which is predicated on the charisma of the leader (Williams et al. 2018). Transformational leadership is also explicitly goal-focused in a way that servant leadership is not. Transformational leadership may well involve followers internalising the vision of a leader (Berkovich 2018), but they do so with a view to bringing about some kind of real-world change or improvement (McCarley et al. 2016). The developmental aspects of servant leadership, on the other hand, are personal, there being no inevitable broader impact (Serrat 2017).

The two types of leaders thus play opposing roles in the building of follower motivation, although that is said with the caveat that psychology as a discipline has largely abandoned simple schemata, treating with caution modifiers such as ‘extrinsic’ and ‘intrinsic’ in conversations about what is now regarded as a complex, protean, condition (Reiss 2012). Even so, transformational leaders should be conceived of as external motivating agents, with a relationship to followers that admits of asymmetry: a follower will respond to transformational leadership as an individual, but the leadership will, in all probability, be presented to a group (Adams et al. 2018). For servant leaders, the role is that of catalyst—through listening and empathising—the motivation coming from within the follower, rather than from the leader’s vision. That servant leadership is a one-to-one relationship is the major enabler of this process (Arain et al. 2019).

Overall, it can be said that the scope for servant leadership to enhance and inform transformational leadership is not as wide as might be expected. If improvement in educational organisations needs to be pushed through by a transformational leader, then it is to be doubted that he or she would optimise their effectiveness by adopting all the features of servant leadership.

Servant and Distributed Leadership

Perhaps a better match for the servant approach would be distributed leadership, especially in its more informal guise (Harris et al. 2019), which has increasingly come to be seen as the *sine qua non* of a well-run school (Hartley 2016). It is, of course, inherent to any hierarchical organisation chart, which represents leadership role-holders at different levels (Jarvis 2021). More prevalently, though, it is evinced by members of an organisation who have no formal authority, but who are able to influence their colleagues through quotidian social and professional interactions (Parker 2015).

Importantly, distributed leadership is to do with interactions between leaders and followers, not the style of an individual leader (Spillane 2006), making of it a workable medium for servant leadership (Van De Mieroop et al. 2020). Distributed leaders do not have to assume a servant mentality, but, for those who do, considerable benefits can accrue. They may, for example, be accepted as role models by their colleagues (Wang et al. 2017). Given this, how servant leadership might inform the work of both role holders in the formal hierarchy of an educational institution and informal distributed leaders is worth examining in more depth.

Servant Leadership for Principals and Teachers

The Servant Principal

As Taylor et al. (2007) argue, there is no necessary contradiction between servant leadership and formal organisational structures. Bringing the two together, however, involves stripping away the power and control mechanisms that are generally the animating forces of a hierarchy (Charalampous and Papademetriou 2021). The servant principal is one who values and develops people in order to build a sense of community. He or she will put others first, behaving authentically, his or her leadership being a genuine expression of him- or herself and open to input and comment from colleagues and followers (Terosky and Reitano 2016). Of the servant leadership features discussed earlier, listening is in prime position here.

Most principals would probably protest that they do this already, but, as with much that pertains to servant leadership, the differences are more those of philosophical stance than practice, the requirement being for principals to think of themselves as servants. This may sound banal, but it is a vital first step, since leadership in any form is intimately bound up with self-identity (Armstrong and McCain 2021). Although a major flaw of servant leadership theory is its proneness to describing what leaders are, not what they do, it would be a mistake to forget that the one entails the other.

It may further be mentioned—legitimately—that principals are appointed to run, and represent, a school or college as an institution and so that is where their loyalty should lie: their trusteeship must be of the culture and traditions of the organisation

with the aim of ensuring that they survive into the future (Bier et al. 2021). In locating the organisation as an entity distinct from the people within it, this contention is counter to servant leadership assumptions.

That is not to say that a servant principal is careless of the organisation as a whole (stewardship is key), but he or she views it through the lens of its members. Acting with a servant mindset, a principal will be less concerned with organisational priorities, policies, rules, and bureaucracy than the welfare of the people that he or she leads (Insley et al. 2016). It is frequently said that leadership is an indirect process (Bush 2010)—a leader realises organisational goals through people—but, with servant leadership, a further remove is added—the leader focuses on helping individuals to realise their goals and those individuals then go on to realise the organisation's goals.

An ancillary benefit is the enhanced job satisfaction that has been found to be a feature of those who work under servant principals (Al-Mahdy et al. 2016; Ghasemy et al. 2022). It must be admitted that most research on job satisfaction has concentrated on transformational leadership, the servant style being ripe for further investigation, but, even so, followers of those principals who have demonstrably adopted a service approach report greater levels of commitment to their schools as organisations and a firmer sense of their own roles than those led in other ways. The servant principal's chief capability is that he or she can create inherent job satisfaction—that which comes from the work, not contingent rewards (Cerit 2009). This is one of a number of reasons why rates of staff retention are relatively high in servant principal environments.

The servant principal behaviours that are cited as most effective in bringing about these outcomes centre on endowing teachers with a sense of purpose that aligns with the school's purpose (as opposed to the principal's purpose). When spoken to persuasively in a non-judgemental way, teachers are prepared to buy in to new initiatives, which they might otherwise resist. They also value personal development and capacity-building opportunities that are distinct from pragmatic organisational requirements. Connected to this is teachers being especially motivated when they feel that their welfare is a matter of concern for their leaders (Terosky and Reitano 2016). Figure 5.1 shows the characteristics of the servant principal.

Servant Teacher Leadership

Another important determinant of job satisfaction among teachers is the engendering, by principals, of collaborative work cultures (Hargreaves 2019). This opens up the possibility of servant leadership occupying more collegial spaces, but, again, notes of caution have to be sounded. Even though distributed leadership has been positioned as compatible with the servant approach, it (like transformational leadership) can be critiqued for ultimately being fixated on organisational effectiveness, rather than personal growth (Cerit 2009). Nonetheless, informal distributed leadership, the

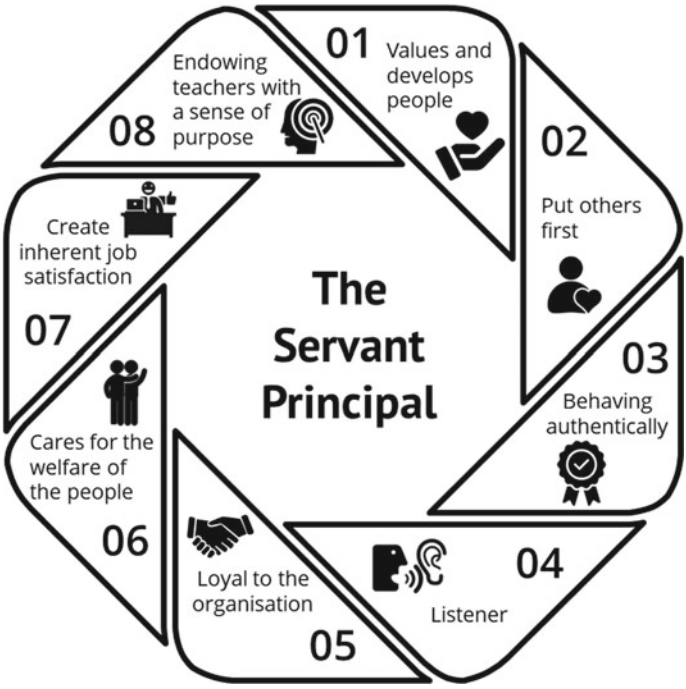

Fig. 5.1 Characteristics of the servant principal

variety that often segues into so-called teacher leadership, can still be promoted as a vehicle for servant leadership within schools.

Unsurprisingly, about teacher leadership there is little consensus in the literature (Ng et al. 2018). Indeed, it is not unknown for articles to be published that use the term without making any attempt to define it (Wenner and Campbell 2017). What most authors do agree on is that it is applicable to members of a school's staff whose main activity is teaching, but who take on leadership roles beyond the classroom with the intention of improving the general quality of teaching and learning, as well as influencing policy and strategy. Whether this is confined to teachers with defined roles—formal or informal—or those who simply offer mentoring, guidance, and support on a peer-to-peer basis, depends upon the author consulted (Stewart 2012).

In that a servant style has the potential to thrive in the presence of leadership distribution, a teacher leadership school offers a highly promising environment for it. Even so, teacher leadership does not differ from any other type of distributed leadership in requiring that it be tolerated, if not mandated, by the top formal leaders (Harris 2010). An essential pre-requisite for servant teacher leadership is a servant principal: any alternative structure is highly unlikely.

Teacher leadership itself can be viewed as hospitable to the servant approach in a number of ways. Firstly, teaching is, by its very nature, a servant leadership enterprise (Bowman 2005). Teachers are leaders in their classrooms with an exclusive

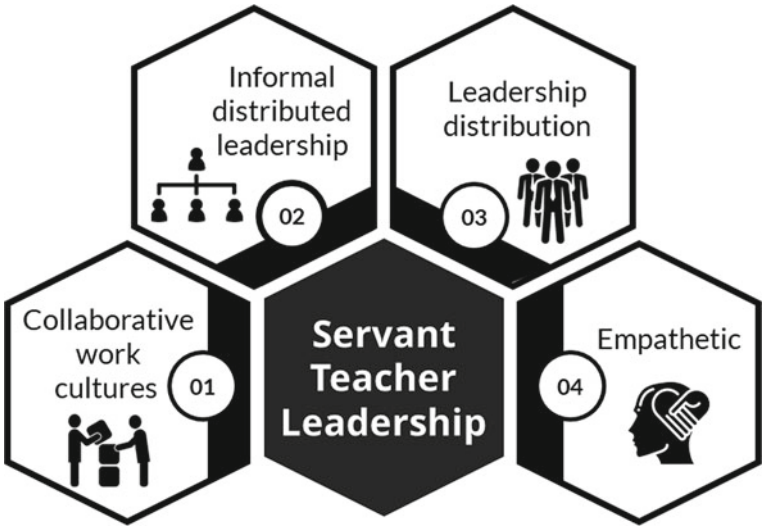

Fig. 5.2 Characteristics of servant teacher leadership

focus on the development and growth of their pupils (Wenner and Campbell 2017). Secondly, informal teacher leadership beyond the classroom is not energised by the position power that goes along with hierarchy-endowed status (Crippen and Willows 2019). Informal teacher leaders are, therefore, obliged to utilise a whole palette of strategies (for example, mentoring less experienced colleagues, working to create the conditions for teaching and learning, networking within and across organisations), most of which bear a striking resemblance to those available to servant leaders. If a teacher leader is to have a beneficial influence on his or her colleagues, then he or she must, for example, be empathetic (Supovitz 2018). Figure 5.2 shows the characteristics of servant teacher leadership.

Teacher leadership would seem to be a sound vehicle by which servant leadership can help to promote school effectiveness and improvement (Noland and Richards 2015), but the problem of how servant leadership would operate on a day-to-day basis has yet to be solved. Having put on the servant mantle, how would a teacher leader affect his or her colleagues and, ultimately, influence pupil outcomes for the better?

Servant Leadership in Action

One possibility is professional learning communities (PLCs), which are a vouched-for means of developing teachers professionally, having been found to make a positive impact in most places where they have been tried (Fuller and Templeton 2019). As Hiatt-Michael (2001) observed, professional learning communities can only work in

an atmosphere of servant leadership because those who lead must be learners along with everyone else.

The nature of PLCs is another area of disagreement among commentators (DuFour et al. 2010). Beyond their involving a move towards collegiality and the prioritisation of learning for constant improvement, nothing like a single definition has emerged (Stoll et al. 2006). For Bell and Bolam (2010), PLCs can and should be a natural part of what a school does. By this logic, a PLC is cultural, involving teachers discussing their experiences, both good and bad, in order to learn from them. As an ongoing methodology, a PLC admits of servant leadership in its implied openness to vulnerability—participants are required to be humble, making of their professional practice a public resource, the better to invoke a spirit of communal sharing.

To others, a PLC is closer to being a specific event or series of events. Hord (2009), for example, describes PLCs as constructivist development opportunities realised through, perhaps, a weekly meeting at which best practices are talked about in an atmosphere of equality and mutual trust. Other examples might be externally provided courses, work based CPD and self-evaluations, all of which forge a bond between structured learning and everyday practice (Stoll et al. 2006).

Either way, a PLC is an avowedly distributive phenomenon, the characteristics of which—in whatever form—overlap to a large degree with those of servant leadership. A PLC is collaborative, a channel for personal and professional development, conceptually based and dependent on its members listening and empathising with each other. It is also, obviously, foresighted in being deliberately constituted as a strategy for improving pupil outcomes (Doğan and Adams 2018). A participant in a PLC seeks to enhance the welfare of others, receiving, in return, the help and guidance of those others.

Admittedly, the marriage between servant leadership and a PLC is not totally harmonious. The former is an ongoing modus operandi, whereas the latter might be more visible in discrete activities. Moreover, the standard objection, that PLCs are goal-orientated and institutional, whereas servant leadership has more diffuse aims and objectives, could be raised. That PLCs have been found to best channel transformational leadership is also worth noting (Voelkel 2022). Notwithstanding any of this, as a practical outlet for the philosophical positions elucidated in servant leadership theory, mutually supportive PLCs represent a good option.

Conclusion

Servant leadership remains profoundly relevant in the twenty-first century due to its alignment with contemporary leadership needs. In an era marked by ethical concerns, servant leadership's emphasis on ethical decision-making and values-driven leadership resonates with modern expectations. It addresses the priorities of today's schools, such as teacher well-being, job satisfaction, and professional development (Al-Mahdy et al. 2016; Ghasemy et al. 2022). Furthermore, servant leadership fosters positive relationship, empathy, and adaptability, crucial qualities that promote school

effectiveness and improvement. Moreover, servant leaders play a vital role in education, preparing students with the skills and values essential for twenty-first-century success, including critical thinking and ethical decision-making (Forghani-Arani et al. 2019).

As attractive as it appears prima facie, servant leadership presents problems to any real-world leader wishing to make it the cornerstone of his or her practice and style (Youngs 2007). Vague associations with morality, authenticity and even 'love' (van Dierendonck 2011) lend the concept charm, but little in the way of a readily graspable set of recommendations for action. The evangelistic tone of much writing on the subject adds complications—it can scarcely be a co-incidence that servant leadership has been enthusiastically taken up by those with an interest in spirituality and faith-based education.

Of course, many criticisms of servant leadership could equally be made of other theories touched on here. Authors have described distributed leadership as no more than a way of 'stretching' leadership within a group or organisation (Spillane 2006). Distributed leaders still have to be transformational, transactional, or instructional. Unfortunately, no manual of how to 'do' transformational leadership, to take one, exists. The only guideline is that it should link to the organisation's larger goals.

A servant leader, it can be proposed, is perfectly capable of filling the same role in relation to distributed leadership, but he or she is even less well provided for as far as practical tips are concerned. In part, this is a natural consequence of servant leadership being positioned unequivocally as leadership rather than management (Kantanen et al. 2015). It is about inspiration and vision, not the nuts and bolts of performing particular tasks. It is geared towards positive change—in which respect, it is not unusual (Leithwood et al. 2008)—but could be clearer as far as bringing it about is concerned. Transformational leadership has the virtue of being supported by a robust body of empirical research: this can still not securely be stated of servant leadership. Many articles about it are largely theoretical and prescriptive; those that report research in professional settings do not always base their conclusions on data gathered using comparable, or provably valid, methodologies (van Dierendonck 2011).

Be that as it may, this chapter has been an attempt to isolate ways in which servant leadership could be useful to teachers and leaders in educational contexts. By alighting on PLCs, it gives one suggestion. PLCs, when properly arranged, allow the flourishing of all forms of distributed leadership, as well as input from the principal, thus playing to servant leadership's strengths. It does need to be stressed that servant leadership is a choice: simply creating a PLC will not spontaneously bring servant leadership into being. However, a PLC does include within it a number of strategies through which the philosophical content of servant leadership theory can be given expression as an approach to maximising educational effectiveness.

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