

In search of clarity on servant leadership: domain specification and reconceptualization

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Abstract There is considerable confusion about what constitutes servant leadership. This paper outlines an approach to guide empirical investigation, while also addressing current inexact specifications of servant leadership, the issue of the unique dimensions of the construct, and distinctive characteristics of servant leadership considering other leadership styles. With knowledge of the abundance of servant leadership domain elements from the literature as a background, we provide a conceptually distinct approach to studying servant leadership to advise future measurement of the construct. Additionally, we discuss the convoluted state of the conceptual and empirical attributes that currently comprise the dimensions of servant leadership in relation to those proposed in existing definitions. Likewise, we delineate the challenges

of empirically parsing out distinctive servant leadership traits in search of an operational definition, identifying traits that might be distinct to servant leaders, and discuss the implications from both theoretical and managerial perspectives; also, we provide directions for future research.

Keywords Servant leadership · Leadership · Sales · Marketing

“Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve.”
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Organizations continually seek leadership strategies that effectively achieve organizational success. Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that leadership is the most extensively studied social influence process in behavioral science, particularly in management literature. Similarly, the need to succeed in an ever crowded marketplace has led marketing and sales researchers to embark on a quest to answer the question: “What characterizes effective leadership?” Many leadership theories have been posited to address this question; in general, we categorize these theories as functional or personal leadership. In functional leadership, general principles and specific guidance are provided to subordinates regarding how roles are to be carried out. Conversely, personal leadership exists when this attention is personalized and the leader has some interest in employee development to enhance organizational performance. Empirical research associated with leadership theories has advanced our understanding of the enigmatic concept of leadership, however, the specific combination of attributes that enables excellent leadership remains elusive. Similar to Goldilocks and the Three Bears (Southey

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1837), the quest to define effective leadership and develop a leadership theory that works best is akin to getting it “just right.”

An increasingly prominent theory examined by marketing and sales scholars, offering an interesting perspective, is servant leadership (e.g., Winston and Fields 2015; Liden et al. 2014; van Dierendonck and Patterson 2014). Servant leadership has traditionally been defined as a leader’s desire to “serve first” (Greenleaf 1977). For more than a decade, servant leadership has been credited with contributing to the success of some of America’s best firms (e.g., TDIndustries, Southwest Airlines, The ServiceMaster, and Synovus Financial) (Levering and Moskowitz 2000). This exemplifies that serving first leads to greatness, not only for the individual, but also the firm.

Servant leadership research has been characterized by many diverse conceptual foci, measurement scales, and dimensions, such as: serving others, team building, trusting, empowering, accountability, wisdom, competence, and communication. Unfortunately, this proliferation of conceptual treatments and measured traits of servant leadership limits clarity regarding the meaning of the construct, as well as the potential impact of this leadership style in marketing. Illustrative of the confusion, Parris and Peachy (2013) offer an extensive literature review on servant leadership and conclude, “there is still not an agreed upon measurement strategy for servant leadership theory” (p. 386). This conundrum is likely an unintended consequence resulting from legitimate endeavors of many independent researchers seeking to investigate the servant leadership style. Also, on a broad leadership spectrum, research on the discriminant validity of many leadership constructs has been lacking (Rowald and Borgman 2013). Further, as the number of leadership constructs has increased, there is increasing concern about the redundancy of these constructs (Shaffer et al. 2016). The result is that leadership researchers must express care in their reliance on the validity of leadership theories.

In grappling with the overall issue of discriminant validity of leadership constructs, and particularly servant leadership, this paper refers to Stewart and Zinkhan (2006) who assert that it is unrealistic to demand a definitive examination of a specific theory in one study that leads to one article. Important theoretical developments require initial creative efforts and many subsequent creative efforts to integrate multiple conceptual and empirical assessments. We note that there is considerable empirical work identifying the aspects of servant leadership and we acknowledge that extant independent servant leadership conceptualizations and results-focused studies are critical from both the perspective of progress toward theory development and dialogue worthiness (e.g., Rindfleisch et al. 2008). However, little work has focused on empirically identifying the distinguishable characteristics of servant leadership. Thus, it is important to initiate a search for distinctive

invariants in servant leadership. A foundational requirement for any measurement approach is conceptual and empirical discriminant validity (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994); which is also the most direct way to assess a construct’s validity.

This paper offers a number of contributions to the marketing and sales fields. (1) We highlight important concepts in leadership as a starting point to provide conceptual clarity for the servant leadership construct. (2) We conceptualize servant leadership, also examining and synthesizing a compilation of conceptual and empirical attributes. (3) We propose a methodological approach for researchers to identify distinctive aspects associated with servant leadership to aid in defining its domain and advancing servant leadership theory. (4) We outline implications for theory development, managers, and researchers. This issue, that servant leadership’s conceptualization, definition, and domain have not been specified and backed by empirical research, is timely and relevant for leadership research in marketing. Servant leadership now figures prominently in marketing and sales literature as a newer promising leadership construct relating to important organizational outcomes (e.g., Jaramillo 2015; Schwepker 2015; Jaramillo et al. 2009a, b).

This paper is organized as follows: it begins with an examination of leadership concepts and their impact in the marketing and sales fields, followed by the conceptualization of servant leadership. Next, the challenges in identifying servant leader differentiators, along with a proposed approach for identification are delineated. Lastly, the paper’s contribution to theory, managerial implications, and opportunities for future research are discussed.

Theoretical development

Considerable leadership research has explored topics relevant to marketing and sales. Such studies have explored many leadership styles, but often do not address the distinctiveness of any particular leadership style. In order to define the domain of a construct, researchers “must be exacting in delineating what is included in the definition and what is excluded” Churchill (1979, p. 67). Therefore, concern exists about whether we are truly assessing the effects of leadership in marketing. We present a few thoughts on leadership research, based on the premise that identifying servant leadership traits that distinguish it from other leadership styles is possible. Whether servant leadership is sufficient by itself as a strategic framework for leading organizations and people, has yet to be ascertained. Further, the sheer number of leadership theories (Avolio 2007), as well as, the overlap of existing leadership theories (e.g., Avolio and Gardner 2005; Brown and Trevino 2006; DeRue et al. 2011) calls for more work focusing on the unique aspects of all leadership styles including servant leadership.

As the search for unique servant leader traits has evolved, some foundation exists to frame the research required to distinguish servant leadership from other leadership styles. Servant leadership is thought to be distinguishable from Weberian (authoritative) leadership, charismatic leadership, and transformational leadership (Graham 1991; Bass and Avolio 1995; Bass 2000). Authoritative and charismatic leadership have little in common with servant leadership. However, transformational leadership has been proposed as having overlapping characteristics with servant leadership (Bass 2000) and several researchers have sought to distinguish transformational and servant leadership (cf. Barbuto and Wheeler 2006; Parolini et al. 2009).

Transformational and servant leadership

Insights from research focusing on the servant leadership – transformational leadership nexus are especially valuable in the domain specification of servant leadership. The primary goal of transformational leadership is focusing the personal value of followers (i.e., employees) so that effort is centered around improving the organization’s performance, instead of their own self-interest (Bass 1985). Transformational leadership behaviors have been linked to leadership effectiveness. For example, in sales research, Shannahan et al. (2013) found that high levels of transformational leadership positively impact performance.

According to Yukl (2002) and Graham (1991), servant leadership contrasts with transformational in one important way – the focus of transformational leadership is on the organization, while servant leadership emphasizes the leader’s followers. Servant leaders value people who make up the organization more than they value the abstract organization (Bass 1985, 2000; Bass and Avolio 1995). This is an unconditional and altruistic concern for followers who form the organization. Yukl (2002) reasserts this notion, observing that transformational leadership is limited because it does not explain phenomena such as altruism and humility. This acknowledgement leaves the door open for further theoretical development.

A conceptual framework of servant leadership

Our inquiry into the distinctiveness of servant leadership begins with an examination of extant definitions of servant leadership proffered in the literature. The epistemic correlation between definition and subsequent measurement of servant leadership is important in that researchers tend to rely on the equality of conceptual definition and measurement once a concept becomes popular in use. Also, and typically, subsequent theorizing about a concept derives from and expands

upon its initial conceptualization rather than from empirical assessments. We find neither to be the case with servant leadership.

For servant leadership to be generalizable, the domain of servant leadership must be established. To date, servant leadership researchers, in following the scientific approach to generalizability have expanded the boundaries of the concept from Greenleaf’s (1977) original treatment to a broad array of traits. It is important to address our understanding of servant leadership by recognizing the critical role that boundary-defining criteria play with respect to coherence of the concept. To accomplish the aforementioned, this section is structured as follows: first, the current state of definitions of servant leadership is examined; the domain of servant leadership is conceptualized; then, a compilation of servant leadership traits is provided.

The current status of the definition of servant leadership

Originally, Greenleaf characterized a servant leader in this way: “it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. The conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The servant leader is sharply distinctive from one who is a leader first” (1977, p. 22). The majority of research on servant leadership claims to be based on Greenleaf’s definition. Yet, existing definitions link servant leadership to a variety of purported traits that depart from Greenleaf’s conceptualization. Also, work has been based on two other authors: (1) Spears (1995) who extended Greenleaf’s work by expanding the concept to include ten traits of servant leaders — listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building; and (2) Laub (1999) who defined servant leadership as, “an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader” (p. 25). Laub (1999) further asserted that “servant leadership promotes the value of developing people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization, and those served by the organization” (p. 23). Even in these three foundational definitions, at least fifteen traits are put forward as part of the domain of servant leadership. These three definitions, along with several others, are shown in Table 1.

Examining the definitions in Table 1, marketing and sales scholars must ultimately determine if these traits asserted to describe the phenomenon are unique to servant leadership, and if they distinguish it from other leadership styles. Primarily, these definitions of servant leadership have been based on intuitive feelings regarding what servant leadership

Table 1 Definitions of servant leadership

Author	Definition
Greenleaf (1977)	“It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to <i>serve first</i> . Then, conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The servant leader is sharply distinctive from one who is a leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage the unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions” (p. 13–14).
Hall (1991)	“Doing menial chores does not necessarily indicate a servant leader. Instead a servant leader is one who <i>invests himself or herself in enabling others</i> , in helping them be and do their best” (p. 14).
Spears (1995)	Extended Greenleaf’s work to include ten traits of servant leaders – <i>listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, community building</i> .
Laub (1999)	“An understanding and practice of leadership that <i>places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader</i> ” (p. 81). Servant leadership promotes the value of <i>developing people, the building of community</i> , the practice of <i>authenticity</i> , the providing of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization, and those served by the organization.
Bass (2000)	“The strength of the servant leadership movement and its many links to <i>encourage follower learning, growth, and autonomy</i> ” (p. 33).
Greenleaf and Spears (2002)	A desire from leaders to <i>motivate, guide, offer hope, and provide a caring experience</i> by establishing quality relationship with the followers and subordinates.
Page and Wong (2002)	“A leader whose primary purpose is to <i>serve others</i> by investing in their development and well-being for the benefit of accomplishing tasks and goals for the common good” (p. 2).
Patterson (2003)	Servant leaders are those who <i>serve with a focus on the followers</i> , whereby the followers are the primary concern and the organizational concerns are peripheral. The servant leader constructs are virtues, which are defined as <i>good moral quality</i> in a person, or the general quality of goodness or oral excellence.
Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2004)	“The extent to which the leader is able to shift the primary focus of leadership <i>from the organization to the follower</i> is the distinguishing factor in classifying leaders as transformational or servant leaders” (p. 354).
Reinke (2004)	“A servant leader is one who is committed to the <i>growth</i> of both the <i>individual</i> and the organization, and who works to <i>build community</i> within organizations” (p. 35).
Sendjaya and Pekerti (2010)	“Servant leadership is not so much about leadership than it is about <i>servanthood</i> . It begins with the discovery of felt and existing needs that propels one to reach out to those needs. Hence, servant leadership is not a particular supervisory style one chooses to use when it is convenient or personally advantageous. Rather, it is a conviction of heart that constantly manifests whenever there is a legitimate need to serve in the <i>absence of extenuating personal benefits</i> ” (p. 645).

Traits of servant leaders identified in the various definitions are highlighted with italics. The definitions without page number are paraphrased from the author(s) work

is. It might be argued that the definitional state of servant leadership is well grounded in concept (i.e., Greenleaf 1977), but not well grounded in empirical examination. For an operational definition to exist, consensus must exist on the answer to the question, “To what are people referring when they use the term servant leadership?” Examination of servant leadership definitions reveals considerable divergence among the traits evident in the definitions.

From Table 1, Hall (1991), Laub (1999), Page and Wong (2002), Patterson (2003), and Sendjaya and Perketi (2010) all focus on Greenleaf’s (1977) notion of serving first on their definitions of servant leadership. However, over twenty-five traits from the eleven extant servant leadership definitions are

evident in Table 1. Moreover, all or none of these traits potentially impact servant leadership upon rigorous empirical examination. If the conceptual meaning of servant leadership is not connected with empirically-observed, distinct manifestations, no precision in meaning is possible.

Conceptualization of servant leadership

Two questions become relevant to the specification of an operational definition of servant leadership. First, the difference between servant leadership and other leadership styles must be addressed. Second, an examination of the distinctive aspects

of servant leadership must be undertaken empirically. This implies addressing the question of measurement of servant leadership. Ultimately, researchers must also be interested in assessing whether servant leadership produces differing results from other leadership styles.

Consider an example from marketing literature involving customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, two related but distinct constructs (Oliver 1999). A customer must be satisfied to be truly loyal; however, being satisfied does not equate to loyalty. Loyalty involves components beyond customer satisfaction. Satisfaction is, a necessary but not sufficient condition for true loyalty. In a parallel fashion, we assert that various dimensions of employee-focused leadership currently ascribed to servant leadership may not necessarily imply servant leadership. Being person-centric is fundamental to being a servant leader; however, in and of itself, not a sufficient condition. The search for distinctive traits of servant leadership likely involves components above and beyond a mere personal focus on the organization's personnel.

Measurement of servant leadership can only be effective if there is strong agreement about what *exactly* is being measured. Churchill (1979) observed, "Marketers certainly need to pay more attention to metric development. Many measures with which marketers now work are woefully inadequate, as the many literature reviews suggest" (p. 72). Furthermore, Buckley and Chapman (1996) suggest that a solution for emerging fields of research might lie in the development of "...a set of core concepts which are analytically rigorous and tractable, yet remain flexible" (p. 244). Core concepts of servant leadership must be grounded in notions about the servant. There is a need to devote more attention to the content validity of servant leadership measures rather than searching for a holistic perspective with broad explanation.

The existence of multiple servant leadership definitions and metrics calls for coordinated and integrative efforts to increase precision in the domain of the servant leadership phenomena. Which of the definitions in Table 1, if any, is an accurate reflection of the domain? And, which scale, then, accurately assesses that domain? With competing definitions and scales, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that some phenomenon relates to some other variables. There can be no expression of confidence in relationships as multiple definitions and scales imply different assumptions made by the crafters of those definitions and metrics.

From a formative perspective, failure to include an indicator risks omitting part of the construct (Bollen and Lennox 1991). A formative approach to servant leadership scale development has dominated the literature. Perhaps, there is some wisdom in employing, at least initially, a reflective approach. This implies that the latent construct, servant leadership, exists and is independent of the measures used to assess it and requires researchers to seek servant leadership indicators that are internally consistent, and conceptually interchangeable. Thus,

removing or adding indicators does not alter the nature of the construct. Each observable item must be a reflection of the construct, servant leadership. We offer the following conceptual definition of servant leadership, derived from Greenleaf (1977). Servant leaders serve first and

- They make sure that other's highest priority needs are being served
- They make a conscious choice to serve that precedes the desire to lead
- They are more concerned about the growth of others than personal growth
- They are more concerned about the growth of others than organizational growth
- Their call to serve first leads to the aspiration to lead
- They must meet the criteria of a servant

The search for the criteria ascribed to servant leaders has been at the center of much debate in the existing literature. For measurement validity an operational definition must specify measurement that adequately captures the meaning in the conceptual definitions. Referring to Table 1, over twenty-five traits are identified in servant leadership definitions. With so many candidate traits, defining servant leadership and measuring it are onerous tasks, indeed. It is precisely for this reason we suggest a reflective approach in an effort to capture Greenleaf's original thinking on servant leadership.

The search for an operational definition of servant leadership must explain how observations will be made so that they reflect, as closely as possible, the meaning of the conceptual definition. Considering this, we submit the following illustrative items, as a reflection of Greenleaf's view of the servant leadership style:

- My supervisor cares about serving people, not just directing people
- My supervisor makes sure that others' highest priority needs are being served
- My supervisor's primary motivation to serve people comes before his/her desire to lead
- The growth and development of others is more important to my supervisor than his/her own growth
- My supervisor cares more about seeing others grow than s/he does about seeing the organization grow
- Serving others is more important to my supervisor than leading others
- My supervisor is truly a servant in every sense of the word

To advance servant leadership theory, researchers should rigorously adhere to the first step in Churchill's (1979) procedure — domain specification, the objective being to ascertain if any specific conceptualization or measures of a construct already exist. The conceptual definition we provided, along

with the corresponding scale items offer researchers a starting point for catalyzing constructive dialogue, which hopefully will lead to the articulation of a conceptualization of servant leadership that follows the imperative of Weick (1999) — the identification of core servant leadership concepts relating to behaviors and their integration with constructs drawn from the other literature.

Servant leadership must be subjected to gradually increasing confirmation for verification (Carnap 1953). Dialogue through journals would serve to provide synthesis as well as replication. Universal statements can never be verified as complete and definitive, but they can be confirmed by the accumulation of knowledge. Hunt (1976) concurs, asserting that the key element in scientific method is inter-subjective certification. Further, in Kuhn's view (1962) progression is equated with problem solving. The implications of Hunt's, Carnap's and Kuhn's theses for those who search for the "definitive" work are clear... there cannot be one definitive work on servant leadership, there can only be good works that provide a foundation for *ongoing* servant leadership theory development and scientific process. Thus, one aspect of the servant leadership research process should be the evaluation of servant leadership work from the perspective of its potential to stimulate dialogue and subsequent investigations.

Compilation of servant leadership attributes/traits and scale development

The study of servant leadership, specifically, and leadership, in general, has resulted in trait proliferation (DeRue et al. 2011). The identification of such traits does foster opportunities to test relationships. However, it seems that servant leadership's examination has resulted in less testing of relationships and more tabulating of traits. The ascribing of traits to a concept is one of the imaginative aspects of theory development and its importance should not be overlooked. Yet, this focus on traits has led to an extensive and unmanageable domain of servant leadership. The criteria for a good servant may have catalyzed the search for servant leader traits.

Servant leadership traits identified in conceptual works

Many conceptual efforts exist on the topic of servant leadership (e.g., Greenleaf 1977; Sendjaya 2003; Patterson 2003; Winston 2002; Wong and Page 2003). Combined, conceptual works on servant leadership have resulted in the specification of a broad set of domain elements purported to comprise servant leadership. Table 2 summarizes the many efforts that have sought to provide trait-specific conceptualizations of servant leadership.

Several inferences can be derived from Table 2. First, most (62 of 67) of the traits conceptually ascribed to servant

leadership do not appear to reflect Greenleaf's definition of serving first. Further, most (50 of 67) of the traits in Table 2 do not appear in the set of traits derived from the definitions of servant leadership (see Table 1). Those traits that appear consistent with the definitional traits in Table 1 are highlighted in Table 2. Second, as with traits gleaned from definitions, any of the traits in Table 2 may be unique traits to servant leaders, but they must be assessed empirically for their uniqueness to servant leaders. Third, the collective content domain of servant leadership extracted from the lifespan of research on the construct is extremely broad. Given the sheer number of traits specified in the literature, no single empirical effort can verify validity of traits for their uniqueness to servant leadership. Fourth, redundancies of traits among different leadership styles likely exist. Unfortunately, these noted matters do not become any clearer when examining scale development efforts aimed at tangibly operationalizing the conceptual domain of servant leadership.

Servant leadership traits identified in scale developmental efforts

Approximately 25 years after Greenleaf's (1970) introduction of servant leadership, empirical work began to appear in the academic literature. Based on this early research, Bass (2000) asserted that the servant leadership construct required substantial empirical investigations, a challenge to which a number of researchers responded. Since its inception, servant leadership metrics have been characterized by a variety of subdimensions (see Table 2). Consequently, the domain problems observed in conceptual efforts are unfortunately mirrored in servant leadership scales as well.

The meaning of a latent construct such as servant leadership derives from the measures of observables (MacKenzie et al. 2005). The approach to servant leadership has offered dozens of observable indicators that have been volunteered to form servant leadership and has largely consisted of the proffering of intuitively logical combinations of observables. While this approach is consistent with most of the scale developmental work that has occurred in the business literature (e. g. Bruner et al. 2001; Bearden and Netmeyer 1999), the result has been considerable variability in definition and domain — the variability of traits is not captured by metrics and few metrics capture the concept of "serving first." Typically, definition and domain are used to identify redundant concepts (Schwab 1980). However, the current state of servant leadership is dominated by researchers seeking to create new measures that capture the essence of servant leadership (e.g., Sendjaya 2003) or measures that are narrower, reflecting a more precise servant leadership metric (e.g., Ehrhart 2004).

The problem persists. Recently, Liden et al. (2015) published a seven item scale to be used as a global metric of

Table 2 Domain elements of servant leadership identified in the literature

Domain category	Conceptual development literature source	Empirical development literature source
Acceptance	Sendjaya (2003); Buchen (1998)	
Accountability	Sendjaya (2003)	van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011)
Acts of Service*	Farling et al. (1999); Sendjaya (2003); Parolini (2004)	
Agapao	Winston (2002); Patterson (2003); Dennis and Bocarnea (2005); Parris and Peachey (2013)	Dennis and Bocarnea (2005)
Altruism/Altruistic Calling**	Winston (2002); Patterson (2003); Dennis and Bocarnea (2005); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Reed et al. (2011); Parris and Peachey (2013)	Dennis and Bocarnea (2005); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Reed et al. (2011)
Appreciation of Others	Russell and Stone (2002)	
Authentic Self		Sendjaya (2003); van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011)
Availability	Sendjaya (2003)	
Awareness	Greenleaf (1977); Spears (1998); Spears and Lawrence (2002); Parris and Peachey (2013)	
Behaving Ethically	Ehrhart (2004); Liden et al. (2008); Schneider and George (2011); Peterson et al. (2012)	Sendjaya (2003); Ehrhart (2004)
Being a Servant*	Sendjaya (2003); Ehrhart (2004); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden et al. (2008); Peterson et al. (2012)	
Builds Community**	Greenleaf (1977); Spears (1998); Spears and Lawrence (2002); Laub (2003); Ehrhart (2004); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden et al. (2008); Reed et al. (2011); Peterson et al. (2012); Parris and Peachey (2013)	
Capacity for Reciprocity	Buchen (1998)	
Caring for Others*	Wong and Page (2003); Parolini (2004); Schneider and George (2011)	Page and Wong (2000)
Collaboration	Sendjaya (2003); Wong and Page (2003)	
Communication	Russell and Stone (2002)	
Competence	Russell and Stone (2002)	
Conceptual Skills	Ehrhart (2004); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden et al. (2008); Peterson et al. (2012)	Ehrhart (2004); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden et al. (2008)
Conceptualization**	Greenleaf (1977); Buchen (1998); Spears (1998); Spears and Lawrence (2002); Parris and Peachey (2013)	
Consensus Builder	McGee-Cooper and Looper (2001)	
Courage		van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011)
Covenantal Relationship		Sendjaya (2003)
Creating Value for the Community**		Ehrhart (2004); Laub (2003); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden et al. (2008); Reed et al. (2011)
Credibility	Farling et al. (1999); Russell and Stone (2002)	
Delegation	Russell and Stone (2002)	
Developing Others*	Greenleaf (1977); Spears (1998); Spears and Lawrence (2002); Laub (2003); Wong and Page (2003); Ehrhart (2004); Parolini (2004); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden et al. (2008); Peterson et al. (2012); Parris and Peachey (2013)	Page & Wong (2000); Laub (2003); Ehrhart (2004); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden et al. (2008);
Displays Authenticity		Laub (2003)
Egalitarianism	Reed et al. (2011); Mittal and Dorfman (2012)	Reed et al. (2011); Mittal and Dorfman (2012)
Emotional Healing	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden et al. (2008); Peterson et al. (2012)	Liden et al. (2008); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)
Empathy**	Greenleaf (1977); Spears (1998); Spears and Lawrence (2002); Mittal and Dorfman (2012); Parris and Peachey (2013)	Mittal and Dorfman (2012)
Empowerment	Russell and Stone (2002); Dennis and Winston (2003); Patterson (2003); Sendjaya (2003); Wong and Page (2003); Ehrhart (2004); Parolini (2004); Dennis and Bocarnea (2005); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden et al. (2008); Mittal and Dorfman (2012); Peterson et al. (2012); Parris and Peachey (2013)	Page & Wong (2000); Ehrhart (2004); Dennis and Bocarnea (2005); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden et al. (2008); van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011); Mittal and Dorfman (2012)

Table 2 (continued)

Domain category	Conceptual development literature source	Empirical development literature source
Encouragement	Russell and Stone (2002)	
Equality	Sendjaya (2003); Patterson (2003)	
Foresight**	Greenleaf (1977); Spears (1998); Spears and Lawrence (2002); Parris and Peachey (2013)	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)
Forgiveness		van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011)
Goal Setting	Wong and Page (2003); Parolini (2004)	Page & Wong (2000)
Healing**	Greenleaf (1977); Spears (1998); Spears and Lawrence (2002); Parris and Peachey (2013)	
Holistic Mindset	Sendjaya (2003)	
Honesty	Russell and Stone (2002)	
Honors Paradox	McGee-Cooper and Looper (2001)	
Humility	Patterson (2003); Sendjaya (2003); Wong and Page (2003); Parolini (2004); Dennis and Bocarnea (2005); Mittal and Dorfman (2012)	Page & Wong (2000); Dennis and Bocarnea (2005); van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011); Mittal and Dorfman (2012)
Influence	Farling et al. (1999); Russell and Stone (2002)	
Inner Consciousness	Sendjaya (2003)	
Inspirational	Graham (1995); Dennis and Winston (2003); Wong and Page (2003)	Page & Wong (2000)
Integrity	Sendjaya (2003); Wong and Page (2003); Parolini (2004); Reed et al. (2011); Mittal and Dorfman (2012)	Page & Wong (2000); Reed et al. (2011); Mittal and Dorfman (2012)
Interpersonal Support	Reed et al. (2011)	Reed et al. (2011)
Leading	Laub (2003); Wong and Page (2003); Parolini (2004);	Page & Wong (2000)
Listening**	Greenleaf (1977); Spears (1998); McGee-Cooper and Looper (2001); Russell and Stone (2002); Spears and Lawrence (2002); Parris and Peachey (2013)	
Modeling		Page & Wong (2000)
Moral Actions**	Sendjaya (2003)	
Moral Reasoning**	Sendjaya (2003); Graham (1995)	
Personality	Wong and Page (2003)	
Persuasion**	Greenleaf (1977); Spears (1998); Russell and Stone (2002); Spears and Lawrence (2002); Parris and Peachey (2013)	
Persuasive Mapping	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)
Pioneering	Russell and Stone (2002)	
Preoccupation with Future	Buchen (1998)	
Provides Leadership		Laub (2003)
Putting Subordinates First*		Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Ehrhart (2004); Liden et al. (2008)
Relationship Builders	Buchen (1998); Ehrhart (2004)	Ehrhart (2004)
Religiousness	Sendjaya (2003)	
Role Modeling	Russell and Stone (2002); Sendjaya (2003); Wong and Page (2003); Parolini (2004)	
Security	Sendjaya (2003)	
Self-Identity	Buchen (1998)	
Sense of Mission	Sendjaya (2003)	
Service*	Russell (2001); Russell and Stone (2002); Dennis and Winston (2003); Laub (2003); Patterson (2003); Wong and Page (2003); Parolini (2004); Dennis and Bocarnea (2005); Parris and Peachey (2013)	
Serving Attitude*		Page & Wong (2000)
Serving Others*		Page & Wong (2000); Dennis and Bocarnea (2005)
Shared Decisions	Wong and Page (2003); Parolini (2004)	Page & Wong (2000)
Shares Leadership		Laub (2003)
Standing Back		van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011)

Table 2 (continued)

Domain category	Conceptual development literature source	Empirical development literature source
Stewardship**	Spears (1998); Russell and Stone (2002); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Parris and Peachey (2013)	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011)
Task	Wong and Page (2003)	
Teaching	Russell and Stone (2002)	
Team Building	McGee-Cooper and Looper (2001); Laub (2003); Wong and Page (2003); Parolini (2004)	Page & Wong (2000)
Transcendent Spirituality		Sendjaya (2003)
Transforming Influence		Sendjaya (2003)
Trust	Graham (1995); Farling et al. (1999); Russell (2001); Patterson (2003); Sendjaya (2003); Dennis and Bocamea (2005); Parris and Peachey (2013)	Dennis and Bocamea (2005)
Values People	Laub (2003)	Laub (2003)
Visibility	Russell and Stone (2002)	
Vision	Covey (1996); DePree & Pree (1997); Fairholm (1998); Farling et al. (1999); Russell and Stone (2002); Patterson (2003); Sendjaya (2003); Wong and Page (2003); Parolini (2004); Dennis and Bocamea (2005); Parris and Peachey (2013)	Page & Wong (2000); Dennis and Bocamea (2005)
Voluntary Subordination*		Sendjaya (2003)
Vulnerability	Sendjaya (2003)	
Wisdom	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)
Total: 83	Conceptual only: 40 Overlap: 27	Empirical only: 16

Those traits consistent with Greenleaf's definitional traits of servant leaders from Table 1 are denoted by *. The attributes that are consistent with traits observed in other definitions in Table 1 denoted by **

servant leadership. These items were selected from Liden et al's (2008) twenty-eight item scale, and are as follows:

- Emotionally healing
- Creating value for the community
- Conceptual skills
- Empowering
- Helping subordinates grow & succeed
- Putting subordinates first
- Behaving ethically

While the short form exhibits parsimony, no effort was undertaken to ascertain if these seven items were redundant with other leadership styles, or other servant leadership scales. In examining recent servant leadership scales (i.e., Winston and Fields 2015; Focht and Ponton 2015), each of these dimensions are reflected in these recent scales with the exception of "helping subordinates grow and succeed." Furthermore, no rationale is provided as to why this, or any of the traits, are unique to servant leadership.

Winston and Fields (2015) also sought to provide some empirical evidence in support of servant leadership as a valid leadership style. First, they identified a set of 225 items contained in extant servant leadership measures, assuming these items to be representative of traits of servant leaders. Of these, 116 were retained, based on judgments of

redundancy across the scales considered. Then, a panel of 23 researchers ranked these 116 items, 22 (the items most highly rated as describing servant leaders) were retained, and the set was ultimately reduced to the 10 essential servant leadership items, shown below.

- Practices what he/she preaches
- Serves people without regard to their nationality, gender or race
- Sees serving as a mission of responsibility to others
- Genuinely interested in employees as people
- Understands that serving others is most important
- Willing to make sacrifices to help others
- Seeks to instill trust rather than fear or insecurity
- Is always honest
- Is driven by a sense of higher calling
- Promotes values that transcend self-interest and material success

While this effort is not without merit, two of the behaviors identified are not consistent with other servant leadership scales. Specifically, "practices what he/she preaches" and "willing to make sacrifices to help others" are behaviors that have not been previously identified, conceptually or empirically, in servant leadership research. The latter behavior, arguably is a facet of

“serving,” which should be an aspect of all servant leadership scales, but it has infrequently been identified in research efforts as a distinguishing characteristic. Moreover, the traits that are comparable with prior research are not necessarily unique attributes of servant leaders.

Employing a different approach to identify servant leadership traits, Focht and Ponton (2015) utilized a Delphi study commissioning servant leadership scholars. They posit that their work is based on Greenleaf’s (1977) definition of “serving first” and “making a conscious choice to aspire to lead”. However, their first task began with an evaluation of 60 extant servant leadership traits. Then, they eliminated traits mentioned by only one participant, resulting in 27 traits, rated on a 4-point scale. Twelve traits were retained:

- Valuing people
- Humility
- Listening
- Trust
- Caring
- Integrity
- Service
- Empowering
- Serving others’ needs before their own
- Collaboration
- Unconditional love
- Learning

We assert that most of these traits are characteristics ascribed to not only other servant leadership scales, but also to other leadership styles, with the exception of unconditional love.

Further exacerbating the servant leadership conundrum is the evidence shown in Table 3, which provides an extensive sampling of the variables in marketing and sales associated with servant leadership research. The result of this work, which employs a variety of servant leadership metrics, that measure multiple traits, implies acceptance that servant leaders may have any or all the over 83 traits ascribed in Table 2. In one sense, there exists some conceptual invariance in our understanding of servant leadership in that the majority of research cites Greenleaf’s (1977) articulation of servant leadership. However, given the number of traits suggested to identify servant leadership both conceptually and empirically, a great deal of relativity and considerable departure from Greenleaf’s (1977) definition exists. While we applaud existing research efforts in this area, the seeming variance with which authors have articulated servant leader traits is problematic from a measurement perspective.

Studies relating servant leadership to positive outcomes (e.g., Peterson et al. 2012; Barbuto and Wheeler 2006) provide little basis for claims concerning the uniqueness of

servant leadership vis-à-vis other leadership styles. Since many different scales have been used in this research, few comments can be made about consistency in findings across studies unless it is assumed that all the different scales measure precisely the same servant leadership construct. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that using multiple scales that may or may not measure the same servant leadership phenomena, researchers have found correlations between servant leadership and antecedent, outcome, moderator, and mediator variables. Thus preventing researchers from drawing conclusions about servant leadership invariants and the comparative effects of servant leadership regarding other leadership styles.

The existing number of servant leadership scales and the dimensional diversity of those scales highlight the need for increased precision in domain specification, as well as the need to develop a scale with better content validity. On the positive side, the differences in existing metrics and divergence in conceptual focus provide a foundation for study and dialogue among researchers interested in the servant leadership phenomenon. Next, we discuss the challenge of identifying the distinctive characteristics of servant leadership in order to begin the quest for a more precise and distinct specification of servant leadership.

Challenges of identifying distinct servant leadership traits

Servant leadership literature has not been rigorous in the application of psychometric principles associated with *construct validity* in scale construction (e.g., Churchill 1979; Anderson and Gerbing 1982). The seriousness of the matter is noted by the wide array of attributes that are treated as indicators of servant leadership. Therefore, it is critical to re-envision a defensible framework by which the truly unique traits of servant leadership are organized in relation to other leadership styles. There are some components of other leadership styles that likely are present in servant leaders, while others distinguish servant leaders from other types of leaders.

The search for distinctive aspects of servant leadership should focus on a question adapted from Bass and Avolio (1990)—what traits conceptually distinguish servant leaders from other leaders? The traits discussed below are derived from the abundance of conceptual and empirical traits purported to comprise servant leadership. As a starting point, we propose those traits observed in the definitions of servant leadership (shown in Table 1). As we previously discussed, the most defining feature of servant leadership, “serving first” has not been featured prominently in the literature as a primary distinctive trait in empirical operationalizations of servant leadership. In addition, researchers should utilize the items we provided earlier in this paper.

Table 3 Overview of topics that have been examined as they relate to servant leadership

Paper	Variables associated with servant leadership	Servant leadership scale used
Ashill et al. (2006)	Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment	Author Developed
Awee et al. (2014)	Affective Commitment	van Dierendonck (2011); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)
Bande et al. (2014)	Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Exhaustion, Work-Family Conflict, Turnover	Erhart (2004)
Choudhary et al. (2013)	Organizational Learning, Organizational Performance	Jacobs (2006)
Dannhouser & Boshof (2006)	Trust in Organization & Management, Trust in Co-Workers, Emotional Team Commitment, Rational Commitment	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)
De Waal and Sivro (2012)	Management Quality, Openness & Action Orientation, Long-Term Orientation, Continuous Improvement & Renewal, Workforce Quality, Organization Performance	Nuijten (2009)
Del and Akbarpour (2011)	Organization Trust	Dennis (2004)
Ehhardt (2004)	Procedural Justice, Organizational Citizenship Behavior (Employees & Managers)	Author Developed
Gil Saura et al. (2005)	Internal Information Processing, Shared Values & Beliefs, Customer Treatment, Service Technology, Service Standards Communication, Service Failure Recovery, Service Vision, Service Rewards, Service Training, Job Satisfaction	Author Developed
Gunnarsdottir (2014)	Job Satisfaction	van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011)
Hoveida et al. (2011)	Organization Commitment	Laub (1999)
Hu and Liden (2011)	Team Mean Age, Organization Tenure, Team Potency	Liden et al. (2008)
Hunter et al. (2013)	Follower Disengagement, Store Sales Performance, Number of Employees per Store, Leader Agreeableness, Leader Extroversion, Decreased Follower Turnover Intentions & Disengagement	Erhart (2004)
Jaramillo and Noboa (2012)	Interpersonal Conflict With Supervisor, Work-Family 1 Conflict, Felt Stress, Job Satisfaction, Turnover Intention	Erhart (2004)
Jaramillo (2015)	Servant Leader Behavior & Servant Leader Perceptions, Behavioral Control, Performance, Task Proficiency, Helping Behaviors, Proactiveness, Unethical Peer Behavior, Ethical Responsibility & Trust, Unethical Sales Practices, Leadership Behavior & Perceptions Discrepancy	Erhart (2004)
Jaramillo et al. (2009a)	Customer Orientation, Adaptive Selling, Customer Directed Extra Role Performance, Outcome Performance, Job Satisfaction, Organization Commitment, Job Stress	Erhart (2004)
Jaramillo et al. (2009b)	Ethical Level, Person-Organizational Fit, Organization Commitment, Turnover Intention	Erhart (2004)
Jenkins and Stewart (2010)	Commitment to Serve, Role Inversion Behavior,	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)
Joseph and Winston (2005)	Leadership Trust, Organizational Trust	Laub (1999)
Koyunco et al. (2014)	Organizational, Hotel Rating	Liden et al. (2008)
Liden et al. (2008)	Transformational Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange, Community Citizenship Behavior, In-Role Performance, Organizational Commitment	Liden et al. (2008)
Lytle and Timmerman (2006)	Service Image	Author Developed
McCann et al. (2014)	Extrinsic Satisfaction, Intrinsic Satisfaction, General Satisfaction	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)
Miao et al. (2014)	Age, Position, Affective Trust, Affective Commitment, Normative Commitment, Continuance Commitment	Erhart (2004)
Mittal & Dorfamn (2012)	Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Human Orientation, Collectivism, Assertiveness, Gender Egalitarianism, Future Orientation, Performance Orientation	Author Developed
Neubert et al. (2008)	Initiating Structure, Creative Behavior, Helping Behaviors, Work Regulatory Focus, Promotion Focus, Affectivity	Erhart (2004)

Table 3 (continued)

Paper	Variables associated with servant leadership	Servant leadership scale used
Oner (2012)	Paternalistic Leadership	Items from Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Page & Wong (2000); Dennis (2004); Greenleaf (1997); Laub (1999)
Peterson et al. (2012)	Firm Performance, DEO Organizational Identification, CEO Narcissism, Prior Performance	Liden et al. (2008)
Schneider and George (2011)	Empowerment, Commitment, Satisfaction, Intention to Stay	Erhart (2004)
Schwepker (2015)	Caring Ethical Climate, Value Enhancing Behavior	Liden et al. (2008)
Sendjaya and Pekerti (2010)	Performance, Outcome Performance	
Sendjaya et al. (2008)	Trust in the Leader	Sendjaya et al. (2008)
Sendjaya et al. (2008)	Scale Development	
Shahzad et al. (2013)	Trust, Organization Citizenship Behavior	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)
Simon & Mali (2014)	Age, Organizational Tenure	Liden et al. (2008)
Vidic and Burton (2011)	Task Orientation, Ego Orientation, Learning Beliefs, Capacity Beliefs, Social Affiliation, Social Recognition, Social Status, Leadership Opportunity	Wong (2004)
Walumbwa et al. (2010)	Commitment to Supervisor, Self-Efficacy, Procedural Justice Climate, Service Climate, Organizational Citizenship Behavior	Erhart (2004)
Washington et al. (2006)	Gender, Ethnicity, Agreeableness, Competence, Empathy, Integrity	Dennis and Winston (2003)
Wei & Dasa (2013)	Affective Commitment, Normative Commitment	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)

Variables associated with servant leadership had significant correlations in the cited works

Other researchers, inspired by Greenleaf, have tendered additional attributes of servant leaders that are hereinafter discussed and highlighted. Laub's (1999) definition, describes servant leadership as *placing the welfare of those being led over the self-interests of leaders*. Page and Wong's (2000) notions of servant leadership reflect a similar concept. They both draw from Greenleaf (1977) who described servant leadership in the following way:

Do those served grow as persons: do they while being served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become a servant? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or, at least, not further be deprived?

Ehrhart (2004) asserts that an explicit central component of servant leadership is a *higher ethical orientation*. A servant leader's humble sacrifice of one's own interests is made out of an *elevated moral/ethical core* that leads to the highest levels of behavioral integrity. This is authentic and personal, not merely a "letter-of-the-law" compliance mentality. Servant leadership has also been discussed as synonymous with *spiritual leadership* (e.g., Fairholm 1997). A servant leader's *sense of mission* and *inner consciousness* give meaning to life, implying that there exists in the leader a conviction that there is something more meaningful beyond oneself. They possess a *sense of higher calling* (Sendjaya 2003).

Servant leaders focus on the needs and welfare of others being led, out of highly ethical and altruistic motives that put the welfare of others above even their self-interests. Extant servant leadership scales assess traits such as *voluntary subordination* (Sendjaya 2003) and *altruism* (Dennis and Bocarnea 2005). Liden et al. (2014) introduce the concept of a *servant culture* consistent with Greenleaf's assertion that servant leaders are characterized by a desire to serve others. Servant culture is viewed as a way in which servant leaders impact the outcomes of others and has shown to be positively related to organizational citizenship behavior directed at the organization (Liden et al. 2014). It is also reflected in the *moral reasoning* that affects ethical decision making (e.g., Cherry and Fraedrich 2000; Singhapakdi and Vitell 1992). Servant leaders seek to live out, and infuse in others, a new outlook regarding the workplace, the work they perform, their co-workers, and the people they serve.

Discussions of servant leadership have also included the unique concept of *agapao* — the Greek word for a kind of unconditional moral love — which can be interpreted as doing the right thing at the right time and for the right reasons (Dennis and Bocarnea 2005). *Agapao* has a social and moral sense that includes "embracing the judgment and deliberate assent of the will as a matter of principle, duty and propriety" (Winston 2002, p. 5). *Agapao* implies that a servant leader is emotionally, physically, and spiritually present for followers (Ferch and Mitchell 2001), fostering an environment of

understanding, kindness, gratitude, forgiveness, and compassion. According to Winston (2002), *agapao* is the cornerstone of servant leadership and the servant leader-follower relationship.

Servant leader researchers must be aware that any non-distinctive traits that are included in servant leadership conceptualizations must be parsed out, as these traits overlap with other leadership styles. For example, Page and Wong (2000) observe that treatments of servant leadership incorporate ideals of *empowerment*, *total quality management*, *team building*, and *participatory management*. These traits are not unique to servant leadership. Likely, servant leaders may possess these traits, and they may perhaps be good traits for leaders to possess. A number of other functional or personal leadership styles also include one or more of these traits. This lack of uniqueness presents problems regarding measurement validity.

Fittingly, van Dierendonck (2011) laments the: “many interpretations of servant leadership, exemplifying a wide range of behaviors,” the consequence of which results in “confusion about the operationalization of servant leadership” (p. 1229). In synthesizing this literature, van Dierendonck conceptually — but not empirically — identifies six common traits of servant leaders: *empowering and developing people*, *expressing humility*, *authenticity*, *interpersonal acceptance*, *stewardship*, and *providing direction*. Although enticing as traits of a good leader, many leadership styles would include *providing direction*, *empowering and developing people*; these leadership traits are not necessarily distinct to servant leaders. An examination of van Dierendonck’s six traits provides further support for our assertion concerning the need to identify the distinguishing characteristics of servant leader.

As a summary, assessment of discriminant validity seeks to demonstrate a lack of relationship between constructs purported to measure different conceptualizations. As evident with servant leadership, these “different conceptualizations” have been viewed from many perspectives. Each of the proposed servant leadership traits, no matter how enticing they may be for connection to servant leaders must be compared to other traits that are assumed to be empirically dissimilar. Our brief review illustrates the ease with which researchers can conceptually ascribe traits to servant leadership, but still begs the question, “Which traits are truly distinctive aspects of servant leaders?”

A proposed approach to seeking distinctive characteristics associated with servant leadership

Differentiators between leadership styles undergird the use of a logic allowing for the demarcation between hierarchical levels of leadership, where the distinctive characteristics of servant leaders emerge. Guttman’s (1950) scalogram

approach provides the core logic for investigating servant leadership’s unique traits in relation to other leadership styles. The Guttman logic begins with the assertion that servant leaders possess certain traits, but those may be present in varying degrees. Servant leadership research must assess whether these proposed traits are indeed unique to servant leadership.

We suggest that a starting point for effective leadership is the fundamental directional competency of the leader, called functional leadership. The leader’s knowledge, skills, and abilities help to define prescribed courses of action for those being led. General principles and specific guidance are provided to subordinates regarding how roles are to be carried out. A lack of these basic leadership skills will likely hinder success outcomes. Two examples of existing leadership theories that would fall into this functional leadership category are authoritarian leadership and directive leadership. We propose that functional leadership, by itself, can produce some measure of organizational success outcomes. However, we also posit that incremental direct effects on employee success outcomes are achievable through two additional hierarchically-ordered leadership focuses.

The second level of leadership influence on organizational success outcomes highlights a leader’s attention to those s/he leads to bring various benefits to employees as well as the organization. When this attention is personalized, there will be some interest in employee development to enhance organizational performance. We call this personal leadership. Transformational, supportive, individualized, and charismatic styles are a few examples of existing leadership approaches that would fall into this category. While a functional leader may “get the task of managing done,” we argue that those being led respond better when they feel they are given attention. With functional leadership followers are concerned with how much leaders know, while personal leadership followers also care about the attention given to them. When personal leadership traits are added to the foundation of functional leadership traits, we believe substantially increased leadership success outcomes are achievable. Personal leadership styles offer attention to individuals, but this attention has lower priority than self- or organizationally-related goals. Individual attention could be sacrificed for the leader’s self-interest or the interest of the organization if a leader becomes engaged in a mutually exclusive trade-off. This is not the case with the leader who ascends to our third leadership influence category — servant leadership. Servant leadership is present when a leader displays the distinguished characteristics posited previously.

If there is a hierarchical pattern of leader behavior, only behaviors consistent with this pattern should be observed. So, if there exists a hierarchy in which servant leadership includes elements of functional leadership and personal leadership, we should find few instances of servant leadership

without elements of the other two. The task of selecting hierarchical models is contingent on being able to choose among alternative error structures in each of the given models. Undoubtedly, there is more than one suitable hierarchical ordering model, therefore theory must guide model specification. The Guttman logic can be used to both develop and test theory, as well as in cases where there may be questions about a hierarchical ordering. So, for example, in assessing servant leadership, researchers must keep in mind that the subject is leadership and that some traits may be more easily agreeable to than others as traits of leaders. In the case of leadership, the Guttman logic may not make assumptions about ordering within levels, but it might be assumed that those willing to take the higher order actions are also likely to have taken the lower level actions.

To illustrate, we refer to servant leadership definitions in order to distinguish servant leadership from functional and personal leadership characteristics. Uniqueness, here, relates to our previous treatment of conceptual and empirical literature from which we assert two broad distinctive aspects of servant leadership: (1) leading out of a core motivation to serve first and lead second and (2) being driven by ideas that elevates the needs of others above oneself and the organization, possibly even at one's own expense. We posit that the existence of these distinguishing characteristics offer incremental success outcomes above and beyond those achieved by functional leaders and personal leaders. Consider the following twelve scale items arranged in one hypothetical ordering presented with Table 4. The matrix in Table 4 depicts these principles using a set of items, individuals, and responses that might occur in scalogram format; we show respondents A through M, measured on twelve leadership items.

As acknowledged previously, there may be some variability in the patterns of agreement across these sets of items, including some “mixed type” patterns that do not conform exactly to a Guttman arrangement (e.g., a respondent who agrees with statements 5–8, but not with 1–4). However, we expect the relative number of these non-conforming patterns to be low enough to produce a coefficient of reproducibility that supports the hierarchy for the data overall.

Our proposed hierarchical representation seeks to provide a framework to study what is (and what is not) unique to servant leadership in the domain specifications proffered by the extant literature. Clearly, servant leaders must be functionally competent in basic leadership skills, but even autocratic or instrumental leaders are likely to possess these characteristics. Servant leaders will be functionally efficacious, but functional leadership traits do not imply the existence of servant leadership traits. Functionally competent leaders could, in theory, be more successful if they exhibit greater personal attention to people they lead. This is where a supportive leadership style (Yammarino and Dansereau 2002), or a charismatic leadership style might offer incremental benefits to functional

Table 4 A Guttman scale illustration: response patterns to twelve leadership scale items scale item

Respondent	Scale Score	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
A	0												
B	1		A										
C	2		A	A									
D	3		A	A	A								
E	4		A	A	A	A							
F	5		A	A	A	A	A						
G	6		A	A	A	A	A	A					
H	7		A	A	A	A	A	A	A				
I	8		A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A			
J	9		A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A		
K	10		A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	
L	11		A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
M	12		A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A

Blank cells indicate “disagreement” with respective items, A indicates agreement

Functional

1. My supervisor avoids making decisions
2. My supervisor intervenes only where problems arise
3. My supervisor contracts the exchange of rewards for effort; discusses special rewards for good work
4. My supervisor monitors performance for error or failure to meet standards; takes corrective action

Personal

5. My supervisor provides a clear vision, sense of mission & pride, achieves great admiration & trust
6. My supervisor listens to & treats each follower as an individual; seeks to understand & follow concerns; coaches
7. My supervisor encourages thinking about old problems in new ways; challenges assumptions & rationality
8. My supervisor sets high standards for all; introduces new challenges; instills optimism

Servant

9. My supervisor puts others' best interests ahead of his/her own; cares more about others' success than her/his own
10. My supervisor sacrifices his/her own interests to meet others needs
11. My supervisor invests her/ himself in enabling others
12. My supervisor seeks to help others & does so with the expectation of seeing those others improve

competency. The personal focus above and beyond successful task management has incremental positive effects on employees and the organization, thus leading to more organizational success outcomes when both functional and personal leadership characteristics coexist. Still, we postulate that one more layer of additional leadership success is present with servant leadership. That is, we believe incremental success will be enhanced when a leader is guided by a desire to serve others first; caring for their employees above themselves and the organization — even if that involves self-sacrifice, and

potentially to their own detriment — the leader is motivated by elevated values that manifest as impeccable behavioral integrity.

The categories of leadership presented in our hierarchical model are purposefully somewhat abstract. As summarizing categories, they are presented at a high level of abstraction for the sake of representation in a stylized parsimonious model. The twelve items are used illustratively, and assuming they capture the essence of the three leadership styles portrayed, would require empirical testing for correct ordering and reproducibility. In our presentation, we postulate that servant leadership is a higher order leadership style (Greenleaf 1970; Greenleaf and Spears 2002; Russel and Stone 2002). However, the logic of the hierarchy allows for the inclusion of other higher order or lower order leadership styles, or leadership styles that are in between the three we discussed. We offer this example with the hope that it provides clarity toward our overall objective — to craft a set of items that conform to the hierarchical Guttman-style pattern and that catalyzes research leading to the development of an operational definition for servant leadership.

Earlier, we suggested a reflective approach to developing a servant leader metric beginning with Greenleaf's definition. Once this metric is empirically verified, we further propose a full test of all formative traits found in the various servant leadership instruments. Posited servant leadership traits can be evaluated based on their ability to offer incremental success outcomes beyond those realized by functional leaders or personal leaders. These traits can also be empirically examined for their marginal contribution to our understanding of servant leadership beyond Greenleaf's (1977) definition. Thus, our proposed framework for analysis does not negate any of the many traits identified in prior servant leadership. Rather, we propose that such traits can be better interpreted and structured in a hierarchical ordering that begins with assessment of our conceptual definition, based on Greenleaf (1977).

Rather than re-invent all the measurement work that has been done regarding the host of servant leadership traits proposed in the literature to date, we might instead seek to bring order to conceptual chaos by re-examining measures/sub-scales that appropriately represent our three broad hierarchical leadership levels. We have postulated that only a subset of those would be measures representing the third level of our hierarchy, capturing the distinct aspects of servant leadership. In fact, our hierarchical view of leadership may help to integrate and unify detailed streams of leadership research beyond that being conducted on servant leadership. For example, if composite scores existed for a set of respondents on scales like instrumental leadership, supportive leadership, transformational leadership, ethical leadership and sacrificial leadership, these summated/averaged multi-item scales scores might be expected to display patterns similar to that in Table 4. The

ability to assess leadership traits and styles at such a detailed level seems especially promising with respect to servant leadership.

While we employ Guttman logic for our discussion, we acknowledge that other methodological approaches exist to evaluate hierarchical orderings of items or concepts. For example, maximum likelihood estimation approach (Kamakura et al. 1991), probabilistic scaling model based on item response theory (Narayandas 1998), and Rasch modeling are also appropriate options for hierarchically ordered sets of items (Andrich 1988; Bond and Fox 2001), and have been applied in marketing contexts. In this paper, we select the Guttman method because of its longevity as a measurement approach, the ease by which its concepts may be understood, and its successful application in a variety of marketing contexts (e.g., Bearden and Teel 1983; Grisaffe and Jaramillo 2007; Gnoth and Zins 2013).

Discussion

The concept of servant leadership has been the subject of multiple tests all designed to provide a contribution to verification and/or falsification of the construct. However, the question remains... how much do such labor intensive efforts contribute in the larger systematic scheme of science where studies, employ different servant leadership metrics? Each of these studies provides some insight into servant leadership. The study of servant leadership is challenging and explanations can be complex. Common definitions do not exist. Some definitions may not be agreed upon. Servant leadership metrics vary from one study to the next.

Our focus has been on the conceptualization of servant leadership through examination of definitions, traits, and outcomes. In addition, we provided a conceptual definition and identified servant leadership traits not evident in other leadership styles. We also proposed an approach that has the potential to bring consensus to diverse fields of current research and prior conceptualizations of leadership styles. Our hierarchical conceptualization, with its focus on distinctive traits, can improve the likelihood of identifying or developing subdimensions that capture the unique essence of servant leadership without redundancy with other leadership styles. Our objective has been to provide guidance through the conceptual morass of dozens of traits intended to characterize servant leadership, and to offer a more defensible, parsimonious, and ordered approach to servant leadership measurement. The following sections discuss both theoretical and managerial implications of this research, as well as directions for future research.

Implications for theory development

As posited earlier, if servant leadership is to flourish as a construct in leadership research, an operational definition is required. We have suggested utilizing Greenleaf's (1977) original work as a starting point and have offered a conceptual definition based on his work. However, our conceptual view of servant leadership must be empirically translated to prediction. Only when predictions are possible, and servant leadership is empirically shown to contain invariants that consistently relate to organizational and individual outcomes, can assertions concerning "what is servant leadership" be realized. Servant leadership has been prolifically researched, so there exists some measurement foundation. However, since multiple metrics exist, and no agreed upon operational definition exists, reliance on any results is tenuous at best. Marketing and sales researchers should utilize our work as a starting point in further developing servant leadership theory, and scale development.

Servant leadership represents an intriguing opportunity to study various marketing and sales force strategies, as well as the degree to which these strategies improve a leadership style that involves more than merely providing the employee with attention. If servant leadership is found to be a higher order leadership style, it seems intuitive to extend this work by examining marketing and sales leadership venues through an investigation of unique aspects of servant leadership that improve performance beyond improvements realized from other leadership styles. Since research shows that transformational leadership has overlapping traits with servant leadership (Bass 2000), the distinction between the two offers value in theory development in marketing and sales leadership performance. Likewise, the impact of servant leadership traits above and beyond those of other personal leadership styles would likely extend the work of House (1971) on participative leadership, as well as Rafferty and Griffin (2006) on supportive leadership.

The existence of differential findings associated with diverse measures impairs attempts to generalize. Work directed at establishing convergent and discriminant validity of servant leadership measures would prove useful for any leadership research in marketing and sales. Additional insights would be gained by asking respondents to empirically discriminate among the servant leadership definitions and metrics. Are respondents seeing what researchers are seeing? Ideally, a study simultaneously examining all metrics of servant leadership would be conducted, but that is not feasible. Certainly, it would be useful to substantiate the invariant nature of servant leadership by examining the measures of the dozens of traits asserted to be indicative of servant leadership. The formation of a trait profile would substantiate arguments about the validity of the servant leadership style. Only after establishing the unique aspects of servant leadership can future research be conducted to determine if servant leadership represents a possible vehicle for assessing and clarifying the leadership impacts on marketing and sales.

Managerial implications and directions for future research

Effective leadership undoubtedly helps organizations through all economic times; it makes a business organization successful, enabling the firm to fulfill its mission. The absence of leadership is equally dramatic in its effects. Without leadership, organizations lack agility, become stagnate, or lose their way. Considerable literature about organizations stress decision-making, and imply that if decision-making is timely, complete, and correct, then things will go well. Yet, a decision by itself changes nothing. Once decisions are made, an organization faces the problem of implementation – that is, how to accomplish things in a timely and effective way. Problems in implementation often involve how leaders influence behavior, change the course of events, and overcome resistance. Leadership is crucial in implementing decisions successfully. The following are a few comments on future leadership research in marketing.

Shared leadership This is characterized as a group level responsibility and emerges as groups make progress toward goals (Houghton et al. 2014; Carson et al. 2007). With shared leadership, influence and decision-making do not occur in an organizational hierarchy (Day et al. 2006). Instead, teams are often formed without formal leadership (e.g., committees, self-managed teams, problem solving teams), thus a strong relationship component. Shared leadership has been shown to be positively related to team performance (e.g., D'Innocenzo et al. 2015). Much like servant leadership, shared leadership is caring-based (Wang et al. 2014) and has been associated with caring behaviors (e.g., Walumbwa et al. 2010).

Given the underlying similarities among servant and shared leadership, it is critical that both marketing researchers and organizations understand the relationship between these two types of leadership. Marketing organizations employ and are impacted by, a variety of teams; so which leadership style is more appropriate? Also, are the two styles synonymous? Do they have distinctive elements? Shared leadership seems to have many similarities to servant leadership, reinforcing the need to carefully evaluate the distinctive characteristics of servant leadership versus other leadership styles to truly ascertain what is impacting what. Only empirical assessment juxtaposing the two styles can answer these questions, and inform conclusions about whether the leadership styles are redundant or variant, and the best way for marketing and sales organizations to implement the most appropriate style.

Top management Researchers have investigated leadership at the top of organizations (e.g., Carmeli et al. 2011; Colbert et al. 2008), but results are equivocal. Specifically, servant leadership has been investigated at the CEO level (Peterson et al. 2012), and was found to be negatively associated with

narcissism and positively associated with organizational identification and firm performance. The study of leadership in the “C-suite” is especially critical to marketing researchers, given the mixed results about the Chief Marketing Officers’ influence on top management teams (Nath and Harbib 2011; Nath and Mahajan 2008). Brown and Gioia (2002) observed that activities such as vision setting, developing commitment, and crafting a learning organization are best accomplished by leadership teams. However, the impact of CMOs on those teams is equivocal, with some studies suggesting CMOs provide value while others do not. We posit that a servant leadership metric that truly captures what is distinct about the construct has the potential to add clarity to the study of leadership at the C-level.

Sales managers The role of the sales manager has changed due to technology, automation, team selling, empowerment, and relational selling (Ingram et al. 2005). Three-fourths of companies’ employ selling teams (Cummings 2007; Moorman and Albrecht 2009). Sales team performance has been investigated as it relates to several interesting factors including sales managers’ empowerment behaviors (Ahearn et al. 2010); impact on customer knowledge creation in sales teams (Mengue et al. 2013); ethical orientation and the ethical mindedness of sales teams (Cadogan et al. 2009); roles in virtual teams (Rapp et al. 2010); empowerment, control, and team performance (Lambe et al. 2009); and, leadership style (Butler and Reese 1991).

In teams, leaders act as the catalyst that makes team members work together. Without leadership, all sales teams and other business resources are underused. Savvy sales leaders understand the needs and issues of their sales team. New developments in leadership theory and methodology, such as servant leadership, must be examined from the perspective of improving effectiveness. As an example, the transformational/transactional leadership style framework is perhaps the most frequently used paradigm in sales research (MacKenzie et al. 2001; Ingram et al. 2007; Schwepker and Good 2010). Transformational leadership has been shown to complement transactional leadership (Dubinsky et al. 1995). MacKenzie et al. (2001) reinforced this notion, reporting that transformational leadership behaviors increase the impact of transactional leader behaviors on outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper offers a new starting point built on previous work that has grappled with the broad domain of servant leadership (e.g., Sendjaya 2003; Wong and Page 2003). Even recent works on servant leadership still reflect confusion and redundancy in domain elements (Parris and Peachey 2013; van Dierendonck 2011; Wong and Page 2003) – and this confusion provided the impetus for our paper. It is our hope that research will continue on the path initiated by such researchers

as Wong and Page (2003), Sendjaya (2003), and Laub (2003). The search for servant leadership parsimony must continue in order to assess the ultimate viability of servant leadership as a construct useful to managers. However, the search for parsimony and scientific application will be fruitful only if researchers first impose more rigor on the conceptualization and operationalization of the construct. In this paper, we have offered one proposed solution in that direction in the hope of advancing future marketing and sales research, and practice, regarding servant leadership theory.

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