Enthusiastic Skepticism: The Role of SLTP in Advancing Servant Leadership

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Servant Leadership: Theory & Practice

Skepticism or enthusiasm – These are the two responses we most often encounter upon introducing ourselves as professors and scholars of servant leadership. Skeptics of servant leadership are often so for one of two reasons. There are those who question servant leadership as unique from other existing constructs such as ethical leadership, transformational leadership, or just good leadership. There are also those who question servant leadership as a legitimate means toward organizational success. "That may be nice for religious and non-profit organizations, but in the highly competitive world faced by corporations and in the highly complex realm of international relations, the servant leader will get crushed every time," they say. Enthusiasts of servant leadership are often so because it corroborates, and gives a name to, their own leadership style and philosophy without much need for proof that it works.

Skepticism and enthusiasm – If these are two extremes on the same continuum, then maybe we can learn a lesson from Goldilocks. Maybe skepticism toward servant leadership is too hard or too cold; and maybe unguarded enthusiasm toward servant leadership is too soft or too hot. Maybe somewhere in the middle is just right. As the co-editors of *Servant Leadership: Theory & Practice* (SLTP), we stand in the middle -- one as the skeptical enthusiast, the other as the enthusiastic skeptic.

From this perspective we've asked the question: "What is necessary to advance servant leadership as both a legitimate field of study and viable leadership practice?" Upon consideration, we narrowed it down to three elements: 1) convergence upon rigorous **definition**(s), 2) more **evidence** and additional types of evidence and 3) tighter **theory** built upon existing evidence and informing future research.

Servant leadership scholars and practitioners need to converge upon a more rigorous **definition** of the construct. There are plenty of lists that describe the characteristics and actions of servant leaders (c.f. Poon, 2006, Prichard, 2013, Spears, 2010, Turner, 1999) and there is even a "best test" of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1991). Although useful, lists of characteristics and "best tests" do not suffice as definitions. Nor does it do the field justice to allow each class to generate a working definition at the beginning or end of each semester as is sometimes done. We suspect that a few definitions of servant leadership will emerge over time as accepted and researchers will continue to refine them until there is reasonable convergence. Just as in the field of entrepreneurship, it would be reasonable for multiple definitions to exist, so long as they are clear, concise, measurable, and describe both what servant leadership is and what it is not. Jim Laub (1999) offers the following definition as a starting point: "Servant leadership is an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader" (p. 81). Page and Wong (2013) offer the following definition of a servant leader: "a leader whose primary purpose is to serve others by investing in their development and well being for the benefit of accomplishing tasks and goals for the common good." These are both strong starts toward defining servant leadership and servant leaders. As a journal, *SLTP* aspires to be the forum where these few precise and measurable definitions emerge.

In addition to rigorous definitional convergence, the advancement of servant leadership as a field needs sound **evidence.** Josh Spiro's 2010 Inc.com article entitled "How to Become a Servant Leader," has been shared across various social media outlets over 1,500 times. In it, he cites Kent Keith as saying, "We've got plenty of evidence that it works from individuals and companies that are using it." Yet Spiro offers no exact reference for the Keith quote and we have yet to find it. In the same article, Spiro offers phrases such as "Keith hypothesizes," "Greenleaf believed," "Keith feels," and "George feels" as evidence of servant leadership's effectiveness. Anecdotal evidence and expert opinion have their places as evidence, but they do little to advance a field. *SLTP's* mission calls for research beyond anecdotal evidence: *SLTP's* mission is to advance servant leadership, both as a field of academic study and as a management practice. We advance servant leadership by publishing quality empirical and theoretical work in the field as well as practitioner-centered work concerning the practical application of servant leadership principles. In "What if we took servant leadership seriously," Feldman considers this mission and highlights that *SLTP* values evidence-based knowledge and we turn to evidence-based management (EBMgt) for insight into the question of evidence. EBMgt generally recognizes four sources of evidence: *human experience and judgment* (this is the realm of anecdotes, expert opinion, history, and philosophy), best available *scientific knowledge*, *systematic attention to organizational facts* (here organizational, geographic, cultural, and historical context are considered), and *stakeholders' values and other ethical concerns* (Rousseau, 2012).

The sources of evidence found among the articles in this first edition are varied across the categories recognized by EBMgt. Irving and Carroll and Patterson offer traditional *scientific knowledge* as evidence. Irving develops and initially tests the

Purpose in Leadership Inventory (PLI). With a sample size of 354 participants, Irving used factor analysis and found that a 24 item inventory provided the strongest overall set of factors, explaining approximately 70% of the variance with Cronbach's alphas in the 0.89-0.97 range. With a sample size of 466 respondents, Carroll and Patterson also use factor analysis, as well as multiple regression and *t*-tests, to compare how servant leadership is played out in India versus the United States. As described in their "Servant leadership in India and the United States" India and the United States cluster on opposite ends of the culture spectrum offered by House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorman, & Gupta (2004). Therefore, Carroll and Patterson argue, if servant leadership works in both India and the United States – two locales with dissimilar cultures – then servant leadership truly is a universal concept (Greenleaf, 1977).

Whereas Irving and Carroll and Patterson offer traditional *scientific knowledge* as evidence, Claar, Jackson and TenHaken, as well as Rohm, offer differing, albeit just as valid according to EBMgt, sources of evidence. While Claar, et al. base their thesis on *scientific knowledge*, they also strongly acknowledge the importance of *stakeholders' values and other ethical concerns.* In their article, "Are servant leaders born or made?," they stress the importance of servant leaders not only looking out for the interests of their direct and immediate followers, but also their customers and suppliers, and the organization as a whole (stockholders/owners, employees and managers) Finally, the evidence put forth by Rohm in "Eagle scouts and servant leadership" can be described as *systematic attention to organizational facts* as he considers the oath, law, motto and slogan of the Boy Scouts of America against the backdrop of the tenants of servant leadership.

As can be seen, the articles in this premiere edition of *SLTP* offer evidence from all four of the sources recognized by EBMgt: *traditional scientific knowledge, human experience and judgment, systematic attention to organizational facts*, and *stakeholders' values and other ethical concerns*. As an aside, this question of stakeholder values and ethics is important to servant leadership. Dean Amory notes that, "A challenge to servant leadership is in the assumption of the leader that the followers want to change. There is also the question of what 'better' is and who decides this" (2011, p. 506). It is also important to keep in mind that any leader, servant leader or otherwise, will always have multiple stakeholders with multiple, often competing, needs. How is the servant leader to keep these organized and prioritized?

Building upon precise definitions and strong evidence, sound servant leadership **theory** will begin to emerge. It is not enough to assert that "servant leadership works" even if we have the evidence to back up such a claim. Research needs to offer the mechanisms (mediators) through which servant leadership operates, and the contingency (moderating) relationships that affect it. Through scientific means, we can answer how servant leadership "works," why it "works," when and where it "works," as well as how, why, when and where it might not "work." And of course we must describe what we mean when we ask "if it works" or when we say that "it works."

As we strive to advance servant leadership as both a theory and a practice, *SLTP* will solicit and publish articles that advance servant leadership definition(s), evidence, and

theories. We invite our readers and authors to journey with us as we truly explore and consider this concept and construct called servant leadership.

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