Discovering the Self-Interest of Servant Leadership: A Grounded Theory

Eric J. Russell, Utah Valley University
R. Jeffery Maxfield, Utah Valley University
Jamie L. Russell, Utah Valley University

Abstract

This qualitative study set forth to discover how senior level leaders from multiple for-profit sectors perceived the benefits derived from serving the needs of followers. The study emerged from a thorough review of the literature and advances the knowledge of servant leadership philosophy by identifying the benefits to being a servant leader. The study involved 14 participants who were willing to anonymously complete the questionnaire developed by the researchers. To discover how different leaders perceived the benefits from serving followers, the researchers employed a grounded theory design, allowing for a rich understanding of the participants' interpretations. The coding and data analysis process revealed a single theoretical finding: leaders realize personal benefits from serving the needs of followers. The implications of this study seemingly address the skepticism surrounding servant leadership by identifying how service to others is in the self-interest of the leader.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Benefits, Self-Interest, Grounded Theory

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory research was to discover how senior level leaders perceived personal benefits derived from serving the needs of their followers. This study builds upon the conceptual work of Russell (2016) who argued the existence of an ongoing tangible and intangible benefit cycle between leader and follower. Russell

(2016) claimed that the leader who served followers was in fact serving self due to an ongoing tangible/intangible benefit cycle. The central question guiding this research asked: how do senior level leaders interpret the personal benefits derived from serving the needs of their followers?

Russell's (2016) work originated from a question posed by Feldman (2014) who asked, "What is the impact of being a servant leader on the servant leader himself/herself" (p. 13)? Feldman's (2014) concern was in regard to a lack of literature addressing the benefits of being a servant leader. Appealing to the self-interest of others is seemingly the easiest way to move an idea or vision forward; for this work, that idea is servant leadership (Locke, 1689/1949).

Consequently, the lack of works identifying the servant leader's self-interest fuels the skepticism surrounding the philosophy that the servant leader functions in servitude (Denning, 2010; Heskett, 2013; Monroe, 2013). Skeptics of the philosophy seem to believe that becoming a servant leader is an altruistic self-sacrifice (Denning, 2010; Heskett, 2013; Russell, 2016). Making the case as to why being a servant leader is in the leader's self-interest is a way of overcoming such skepticism.

The goal of this study was to discover how individual leaders perceived the benefits derived from the followers' needs being served, thus growing in his/her leadership abilities. The study's 14 participants were senior level leaders from for-profit organizations headquartered in the Western United States. The implication of the work involves reducing the skepticism surrounding servant leadership philosophy by discovering how serving a follower's needs serves the self-interest of the leader.

A desire to give a voice to the study's participants was the reason the researchers chose a qualitative research method (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003). The qualitative method using a grounded theory design possesses the ability to glean a rich participant interpretation of experiences resulting in theoretical discovery (Camic et al., 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Additionally, Winston (2010) argued that servant leadership philosophy needed more qualitative research to understand the influence this philosophy has on individuals and organizations. It is the aim of this work to advance the understanding of the philosophy.

This work begins with a review of the literature. Empirical works presented in the literature review formed the study and became the foundation for the study's questionnaire (Babbi, 1998). The work moves to present the review of the literature, the research methodology and study design, the results of the grounded theory analysis, and a discussion surrounding the research findings and their relationship to the literature. This work concludes by identifying the implications of the study and future research ideas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The thorough review of the literature came together to form this study. In addition, the script used to glean an understanding of the participants' interpretations came directly from the literature. It begins by addressing the basis of servant leadership philosophy. The literature review then moves on to address the specific areas of servant leadership relating to follower growth, meeting follower needs, follower independence, empowerment, follower success, trust and loyalty, building community, creativity, and innovation (Patterson, 2003; Spears, 2010; Winston, 2003; Yoshida, Sendjaya, Hirst, & Cooper, 2014). This section of the article ends with a delineation of the concepts of rational selfishness, self-interest, and the theoretical concept of servant leadership's cycle of benefit.

The Servant Leadership Philosophy

Almost 50 years ago, Robert Greenleaf conceptualized the modern philosophy of servant leadership. In his seminal essay The Servant as Leader (Greenleaf, 1970), he penned a theoretical concept to possibly overcome toxic managerial and leadership practices within organizations. Greenleaf's (1977/2002) work argued that the individual that desires to serve others, emmerges as an authentic leader. This authentic leader is one who is gifted power from the followers, a power earned through trust (Greenleaf, 1977/2002; Hunter, 2004; Spears, 2010).

The basic tenant of servant leadership according to Greenleaf (1977/2002) states,

> Servant leadership begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. He is sharply different from the person who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve after leadership is established. The leader first and the servant first are two extreme types. Between them, there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature (p. 27).

The servant leadership philosophy consists of three fundamental questions. The first asks, "do those served grow as persons (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27)?" The second question is, "do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27)?" And the third question asks, "what is the effect on the least privileged in society--will they benefit or at least not be further deprived (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27)?" These fundamental questions have become the cornerstones for research and writings on the philosophy. Since the time Greenleaf published The Servant as Leader (1970) almost 5 decades ago, authors and researchers have expanded servant leadership into the leadership philosophy that it is today.

Autry (2001) brought forth the philosophy to the masses, making the case for the servant leader as a pathway for organizational success. Autry (2001) argued that the servant leader moved beyond the status quo by realizing success comes from the work and efforts of those served. Hunter (2004) expanded upon the philosophy's aspect of legitimate power and strength, arguing that true power comes as a gift from followers; the servant leader holds these gifts sacred and strives to never lose them. This desire to serve followers as a servant leader is a natural state of being, brought forth from one's inner self and a moral love for others (Blanchard, 1999).

Years after Greenleaf (1970) wrote his original essay, academics and writers came forward to identify specific aspects of the philosophy (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Page & Wong, 2000; Russell & Stone, 2002). These works would become the building blocks of future research and study on the philosophy. Larry Spears, a mentee of Robert Greenleaf and a student of the philosophy, came forward with specific characteristics of servant leadership (Spears, 2010). Spears (2010) identified from the work of Greenleaf, certain qualities that servant leaders possess. Though not exhaustive, the characteristics identified in servant leaders are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2010).

Besides Spears (2010), researchers came forward to identify virtual constructs of the philosophy. The premise was servant leadership transcended other leadership practices and demanded its own identified constructs (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Patterson (2003) identified the constructs of the servant leader, while Winston (2003) identified them for the servant follower. Patterson's (2003) seven constructs of the leader were agapao love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service. Winston's (2003) constructs of the servant follower are agapao love, commitment to the leader, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, altruism towards the leader/leader's interest, and service. The servant leader-servant follower relationship is a cycle of service to one another (Winston, 2003).

These central works involving the philosophy come together to form this research study. As the review of the literature moves on, the next section addresses the growth of followers that stems from the leader serving their needs.

The Growth of Followers

Discussed in the previous section, the first question Greenleaf (1977/2002) posed regarding servant leadership asked, "do those served grow as persons (p. 27)?" This question goes to the heart of servant leadership and what it means to be a servant leader. As a leader, understanding the philosophy is accomplished by asking, "Do one's followers grow as persons?". If the answer is no and one's people remain in status quo, then that is a failure of leadership. However, if the answer is yes, that is a success of leadership (Turner, 2000).

When Spears (2010) identified the characteristics of the servant leader, one of those characteristics was a commitment to the growth of people. This commitment relates to a servant leader's desire for people to be more tomorrow than they were today. It's about seeing one's people transcend, becoming future servant leaders (Greenleaf, 1977/2002; Sendjaya, 2015). As Spears (2010) argued:

Servant leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, the servant leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within his or her organization. The servant leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything in his or her power to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues (p. 23).

As followers grow both as persons and leaders, they become greater assets to the organization (Sendjaya, 2015). As greater assets, they are able to grow beyond their former selves and face both greater challenges and new opportunities (Vinod & Sudhakar, 2011). This growth strengthens the organization's future, allowing for a more capable workforce that is both able and ready to take on new challenges (Sendjaya, 2015).

Meeting the Needs of Followers

The core relationship of the servant leader-servant follower is based upon meeting each other's needs so in turn they meet the needs of the organization. Within that relationship is recognition that all people have certain needs. These needs can be as basic as the physiological need for things like food and shelter, to greater needs associated with individual growth and belonging (Maslow, 1943). In any case, serving these needs is a priority for those professing to be a servant leader.

Human need is the cornerstone for growth; the more basic the need the more essential it is. As Maslow (1943) stated, "for the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interest exists but food" (p. 375). This example of basic human need underscores Greenleaf's (1977/2002) argument for the servant leader to meet the needs of followers. It comes from an understanding that if the essential needs of the person are not being met, that person cannot be expected to grow. The individual remains in a state of surviving, essentially preoccupied with the need for the basic (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1965).

Meeting the needs of followers involves giving one's people the knowledge, skills, abilities, and tools they need to be successful. This in no way is charity, nor is it a handout. In fact, it is just the opposite. The servant leader who seeks to serve the needs of the follower benefits by the follower's ability to grow and thus serve the needs of both the leader and the organization (Russell, 2016). The follower is free to transcend the thoughts and mental focus of basic needs, growing as an individual and performing at a higher level (Maslow, 1965). The individual follower becomes "more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27)."

Independence and Empowerment of Followers

The autonomous follower becomes the independent follower, one who can be delegated to and empowered (Greenleaf, 1977/2002; Patterson, 2003). This type of follower is one that moves beyond the need for supervision and constraint, becoming loyal to the organization and its leadership (Ndoye, Imig, & Parker, 2010; Ton, 2014). Empowerment is a gift of trust from the leader to the follower (Ton, 2014). Often times, the follower appreciates this gift; it becomes a strengthening of the leader-follower relationship; the follower finds satisfaction in their new independence (Ton, 2014).

To empower one's followers is to gift to them one's trust as a leader, believing in the followers' abilities, thus allowing one's self to let go of control (Patterson, 2003; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). The empowered follower makes decisions and charts courses independent of direct oversight (Greenleaf, 1996). Being autonomous and trusted in their abilities, they can move forward. The leader is at ease because he or she realizes that the follower is both capable and worthy of authority. The follower moves comfortably forward due to the trust he or she has for the leader, aware that the leader is supportive of their endeavors and decisions (Patterson, 2003).

The independent follower is one that is emotionally mature and capable of taking on greater responsibility (Young-Ritchie, Laschinger, & Wong, 2009). Because the servant leader is committed to follower needs and growth, followers are able to transcend their role within the organization, thus becoming leaders themselves (Greenleaf, 1977/2002; Spears, 2010). This frees the leader from the time and responsibility of basic supervision, allowing him or her to focus attention on other opportunities (Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

Success of Followers

Smith (1759/2010) wrote there are times when individuals serve and encourage others simply "for the pleasure of seeing it" (p. 3). In this instance, the individual is not serving another for compensation, nor is he or she doing so to gain support. He or she is simply serving someone to experience the joy that comes from another's success. This, however does not always need to be the case, as another reason is for the benefit of all.

Grant (2013) found that in this idea, everyone benefits, is a win for all involved. As individual followers succeed, leaders succeed. In addition, the success of followers becomes a direct measuring stick as to what kind of leader one is (Greenleaf, 1996). It is about understanding how this works. As a leader, when one's followers succeed, the organization and the leader are better off. The followers' success is not a stand-alone experience where only the followers benefit; their success is the leader's success (Grant, 2013). For example, a follower is able to develop a new system that the leader envisioned, which saves the organization both time and money. The follower is successful and rewarded for his or her work, the organization benefits from the time and money saved, and the leader benefits from having a successful new system. This is a win for all involved (Grant, 2013).

The success of followers comes from leaders who serve follower needs so they can carry out the vision. This can be something as simple as educational benefits that allow followers to pursue advanced academic degrees and certifications or something far more complex like leadership mentoring and job shadowing for career advancement. These are only a couple of the many ways followers can grow and succeed (Ton, 2014). The success of followers creates an atmosphere of achievement that becomes contagious. It opens the organization up to healthy competition and drive (Conley, 2007).

Trust and Loyalty

The servant leader is one who understands that trust is the foundation of all relationships (Patterson, 2013). Trust is the cornerstone to gaining legitimate power (Greenleaf, 1977/2002). When followers trust a leader, that leader is gifted the power of decision, becoming a trustworthy servant to the people (Greenleaf, 1996). What this means is that followers who trust their leader, will carry out the leader's vision and orders; they do so not out of fear, but rather, out of love stemming from the trust of the leader (Greenleaf, 1996).

This creates a culture of loyal following, one where individuals perceive that their best interests are in the mind of the leader (Chan & Mak, 2014). Furthermore, it is an understanding of followers that the best interest of the organization align with their best interest (Elliker, 2016). An organization is the people and without them, it is a hollow entity. The servant leader links the organization and its people; he or she envisions it as a system that works together for the greater good (Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1997). The servant leader aligns and serves these needs, creating a culture of shared loyalty that strengthens trust (Chan & Mak, 2014). This leads to an environment where followers, leaders, and the organization are successful (Grant, 2013).

Trust does not come to the servant leader easily; it is earned over time (Caldwell & Clapham, 2003). An organizational atmosphere of trust is honed through honesty and dedication (Caldwell, Davis, & Devine, 2009). This trust is easy to lose (Caldwell et al, 2009; Greenleaf, 1996). Trust for the servant leader is vital, it is where power comes from (Greenleaf, 1996). The trusted leader, whose followers are loyal, is a powerful leader free to make decisions and chart the course for the organization. The trusted leader easily persuades others to follow, for followers desire to serve their trusted leader (Spears, 2010).

Trust creates a positive organizational environment that takes little effort to navigate. Such an atmosphere fosters a culture of openness, pride and ownership (Caldwell & Clapham, 2003). This organizational culture is built upon trust and duel leader-follower loyalty, creating a community of belongingness (Caldwell & Dixon, 2010; Maslow, 1943).

Building Community

By nature, people are social creatures who desire both belonging and acceptance (Maslow, 1943). The servant leader is keenly aware of this need to belong and strives to

SLTP. **4**(1), 75-97

build a community (Spears, 2010). This is why Spears (2010) identified building community as a characteristic of the servant leader. Social belonging is a basic need of the person, often times those who are marginalized or isolated from a community suffer negative psychological repercussions (Maslow, 1943).

Building community begins by creating an environment of inclusion, one based upon trust and driven by a desire to bring people together for the greater good (Spears, 2010). The servant leader becomes a steward to this community, serving those within it so it can thrive (Block, 2013). Taft (2012) noted, as a steward you are responsible for the community of followers within the organization, as well as the organization's interaction with the outside world. This extends the community of belonging beyond the organizational borders by creating greater roles and responsibilities.

As a steward to the community, the servant leader is accountable for its health and wellbeing (Block, 2013; Spears, 2010). The servant leader understands that a healthy community is made up of healthy followers, whose needs are met so they can collectively work towards a better tomorrow. Moreover, it is a healthy community that fosters ideas and gives way to creativity and innovation (Conley, 2007; Ton, 2014).

Creativity and Innovation

 As the needs of followers are met, they begin to transcend as individuals, finding their pathway to self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). It is at the point of self-actualization that the follower's creativity and innovation comes alive (Conley, 2007). The self-actualized follower is able to let go of the search for basic physiological needs, freeing their time and allowing them to focus on greater things (Liden, Wayne, Chenwei, & Meuser, 2014). The servant leader fosters creativity and innovation by serving the follower's needs, thus allowing for self-actualization (Liden et al., 2014).

Research has shown that servant leadership fosters creativity and innovation (Yoshida et al, 2014). The servant leader's action towards followers naturally gives way to creative behaviors and innovative ideas (Yoshida et al, 2014). It seemingly goes beyond simply serving the needs of followers; it exists because followers believe their leader trusts them and they trust their leader (Caldwell et al, 2009). They trust that their leader desires them to be innovative and creative, moving beyond what exists in the moment. In addition, they trust that their leader will support their ideas and remove the barriers holding back progress (Oliverira & Ferreira, 2012).

The servant leader understands that the future of the organization does not rest upon him or her, but rather on the shoulders of its people. The more innovative and creative the people, the brighter the organization's future (Ton, 2014). For the servant leader is keenly aware that without an organization there is no need for a leader, and that no organization exists without the people. The innovative spirit of followers is nurtured and served by the servant leader. From that service, followers self-actualize and the leader benefits (Russell, 2016).

Rational Selfishness, Self-Interest, and the Cycle of Benefit

The concept of rational selfishness involves doing something for which one ultimately benefits in a way that does not negatively impact another (Rand, 1964). For example, an individual decides to start a business. For the business to function, he or she must hire employees. In this case, the employees' benefit from paid work and benefits; however, the founder of the company, if successful, will realize greater prosperity. Most likely the motivation for starting the company had little to do with benefiting others, but rather, self. For whatever the reason, the founder desired to be a business owner. Nevertheless, being a rational selfish decision to own a business, others, in this case employees of said business, are not negatively impacted, but rather have secure employment. This is free market appeal based upon the self-interest of both parties. In this case the leader and follower benefit from one another (Smith, 1776/2002).

Rational selfishness involves appealing to one's self-interest, both acknowledging and accepting that there are tangible and intangible benefits to self from one's actions (Schwartz, 2015). Appealing to the self-interest of others is a pathway for the servant leader to persuade people to accept an idea, carry out a vision, or take on a task (Spears, 2010). As Locke (1689/1949) argued, it is easier to make the case for something by highlighting how it is in the self-interest of another. The ability to persuade others by engaging their self-interest is a way to benefit one's own self-interest without the use of coercion or force (Rand, 1966). This is a moral practice that recognizes the worth of others, as well as the worth of self.

Biddle (2002) argued that being aware of one's self-interest is a moral issue. The individual who takes care of self does not have to rely on others to do it (Biddle, 2002). This is a rational selfish decision that allows individuals to come together for the greater good, yet at the same time ensuring each individual's self-interest (Blau, 1964; Grant, 2013).

For the servant leader, this involves understanding when one serves the needs of others, tangibly and/or intangibly, it benefits the leader. This is known as servant leadership's cycle of benefit (Russell, 2016). The cycle is an ongoing exchange of self-interest where the leader serves the follower and the follower serves the leader; from that service both leader and follower benefit (Russell, 2016). This work attempts to bring Russell's (2016) concept to life in the words of senior level leadership, interpreting their perceptions of the benefits to self, derived from meeting the needs of followers.

METHOD

The setting of this qualitative grounded theory research study took place at for-profit organizations located in the Western United States. The researchers employed a grounded theory design to conduct the study. Grounded theory design is a systematic approach of data collection and analysis leading to theoretical discovery (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser &

Strauss, 1999). The design allows for an analysis of data using a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

To conduct the study, the researchers developed a script consisting of open-ended questions to be used as the study questionnaire. The script avoided key terms and language that could compel participants to answer questions in a specific way in order to avoid researcher bias (Babbi, 2010). The researchers developed the script using existing empirical works pertaining to leadership to glean an understanding of the participants' interpretations and perceptions of the benefits to self from serving followers, see Table 1. The script's questions asked participants to interpret the personal impacts, effects, and benefits resulting from serving others. For example, one of the script questions asked, how does it affect you as a leader when your followers succeed? Participants answered the questions privately, in writing, by accessing the questionnaire anonymously through an online database called Qualtrics®. Participation in the study was voluntary and took less than 30 minutes.

Table 1
Specific Script Areas of Focus and Sources

Area of Focus	Sources
Follower growth	Greenleaf, 1977/2002; Sendjaya, 2015; Spears, 2010
Meeting the needs of followers	Greenleaf, 1977/2002; Sendjaya, 2015; Spears, 2010
Follower independence	Greenleaf, 1977/2002; Patterson, 2003; Young-Ritchie et al, 2009; Zhang & Bartol, 2010
Follower success	Grant, 2013; Greenleaf, 1996; Vinod & Sudhakar, 2011
Follower trust	Caldwell & Clapham, 2003; Chan & Mak, 2014; Grant, 2013; Heskett et al., 1997; Patterson, 2003
Follower loyalty	Caldwell & Dixon, 2010; Chan & Mak, 2014; Grant, 2013; Heskett et al., 1997; Patterson, 2003
Positive community	Block, 2013; Greenleaf, 1977/2002; Spears, 2010; Taft, 2012
Follower creativity and innovation	Conley, 2007; Liden et al, 2014; Oliverira & Ferreira, 2012; Yoshida et al., 2014

Sampling

The population used in this study consisted of 14 senior level leaders from multiple for-profit organizations headquartered in the Western United States; see Table 2. The skepticism surrounding the philosophy primarily stems from the for-profit sector and was the deciding factor as to why the researchers elected to focus the study on leaders from for-profit organizations (Denning, 2010; Heskett, 2013; Monroe, 2013). The participants ranged in age from 43-64, with 12 being male and 2 being female. To protect the anonymity of the participants, specific organization, age and gender information is not disclosed.

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Table 2
The Participants of the Study

Participant	Organizational Position	For-Profit Sector
Participant 1	President	Technology
Participant 2	Chief Financial Officer	Energy
Participant 3	President	Architecture
Participant 4	Senior Partner	Legal Services
Participant 5	Associate Vice President	Food Production
Participant 6	Managing Director	Finance
Participant 7	Chief Operating Officer	Conglomerate
Participant 8	Director of Operations	Health & Wellness
Participant 9	Senior Director	Educational Services
Participant 10	Production Officer	Agriculture
Participant 11	Vice President of Marketing	Conglomerate
Participant 12	Director of Sales	Leisure/Sporting Goods
Participant 13	Lead Project Manager	Technology
Participant 14	Chief Executive Officer	Conglomerate

The researchers used a type of purposeful sampling known as expert sampling (Patton, 2002). The justification for using the purposeful-expert sampling process is it allows for theoretical discovery involving data collection and analysis from pre-selected specific experts (Patton, 2002). Participants were individually recruited to be a part of the study on an ongoing basis. The researchers relied on data saturation to determine the study's sample size (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Saturation, as it pertains to qualitative research, involves data collection and analysis to a point where nothing new emerges (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1999). No more participants were recruited once saturation occurred.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of multiple questionnaires obtained from leaders from for-profit organizations headquartered in the Western United States. Prior to conducting this study, the researchers obtained permission from their University Institutional Review Board to conduct both a pilot study to determine the script's veracity, and this research study. The pilot study involved several leaders from an academic organization who agreed to answer the questions in the form of a written answer survey (Babbi, 1998, 2010). The pilot study allowed the researchers to edit and refine the questions in order to develop a rich and meaningful script for the actual research study (Babbi, 2010).

To protect the study participants, the researchers removed any personal identifiers. To ensure trustworthiness, the researchers triangulated data sources from multiple participants, had another researcher preform an analysis for comparison, and presented the data as in-depth rich descriptions in the results section (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In addition, the researchers followed a specific, systematic grounded theory approach to analyze the data and established a secure database for data collection and storage to ensure data reliability (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Garson, 2013; Glasser, 1998).

Data Analysis

The data analysis began with the researchers organizing and preparing the data for analysis, removing any personal identifiers of each of the participants and assigning numbers, then reading thorough the data, taking notes, and writing memos (Glasser, 1998). The researchers utilized a tiered process for the sorting and analysis of the data, which consisted of constant comparisons (Glasser & Strauss, 1999). The researchers analyzed the data using a hand coding process (Basit, 2003). The hand coding process allowed researchers to spend a lot of time reading and rereading the data, color-coding different attributes and writing notes and ideas down (Basit, 2003; Charmaz, 2006; Garson, 2013; Glasser, 1998).

The coding process first identified overarching open codes consisting of single words and short phrases (Charmaz, 2006; Glasser & Strauss, 1999). The open codes revealed specific relationships resulting in axial codes (Charmaz, 2006). The axial codes converged to form the selective codes, reaching saturation to reveal and relate the core categories that allowed for the study's theoretical development with attributes (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glasser & Strauss, 1999). The theoretical findings are presented in the results section of the article. The researchers then interpreted the theoretical findings, reporting them in the discussion section. The findings resulted in a greater understanding of how leaders perceive and interpret the benefits to self that come from serving followers, as well as the development of propositions for future studies (Glasser & Strauss, 1999).

Results

A single theoretical finding emerged from the data analysis of the questionnaires: leaders realize personal benefits from serving the needs of followers. The two attributes that converged to form the theoretical finding were, validation as a leader and freedom from management. Each attribute is composed of several themes; see Table 3.

The following section presents the theoretical finding's attributes that resulted from the data analysis in the words of the participants. To protect the identity of the participants, each was assigned a "P" and a number.

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Table 3
Theoretical Finding with Attributes and themes

Theoretical Finding	Attributes	Themes
Leaders realize personal benefits from serving the needs of followers	Validation as a leader	By realizing the needs of followers are met; Seeing followers succeed; Building a positive organizational community; Followers becoming creative and innovative; Relationships built upon trust and loyalty
	Freedom from management	As followers grow as leaders themselves; As followers become independent; As followers become capable of being empowered

Attribute 1

The first attribute within the theoretical finding was validation as a leader. The different themes that formed the attribute validation as a leader were, by realizing the needs of followers are met, seeing followers succeed, building a positive organizational community, followers becoming creative and innovative, and relationships built upon trust and loyalty.

By realizing the needs of followers are met. P11 wrote, "You can't expect the person who is following to do their job correctly and efficiently if you don't give them what they need to do the job." P12 claimed that giving followers what they need, "Allows everyone to accomplish more." P13 added to this by saying, "When the personal needs of followers are met, leaders are able to look toward increasing their influence for good." Adding to this P1 wrote, "When needs are being met, followers are free to focus on their tasks and to develop their skills. My business runs more smoothly and clients are being served." P9 stated, "If there is a situation where someone does not feel as though his or her needs are being met, they will not last long term and it is better for everyone to change the situation." P2 wrote that, "Life is better for all of us; it comes from aligning follower's needs with the needs of the firm."

Seeing followers succeed. As followers become successful, P2 noted that "Successful followers set good examples for other followers, they become mentors and the circle is complete." P2 added:

> We all grow, our clients are happy and we are more profitable which lifts all of us. When our followers succeed this can happen. Life is good for all when everyone succeeds. This kind of success helps all boats rise.

SLTP. **4**(1), 75-97

This leads to success for all involved as P10 claimed, "As team members succeed it is a win for the whole team." P10 went on to say, "Meeting the needs of team members means that you get to know each member of your team and can do what is best for each individual. This creates an openness that turns into synergy with in the team."

P14 sees the validated leader as one whose success is shared with the organization stating, "When those I work with succeed, it is a step for the company toward success.

P3 added to this by saying, "It makes the entire organization stronger and increases the ability for the company to achieve our objectives." This happens, as P3 noted because "People will act what is in the best interest of the community, not necessarily just for themselves." P8 supported this claim by stating, "We all do better." This according to P12 is "Very uplifting." In addition, it validates a leader's pride as P5 discussed:

It also gives me great pride in their accomplishments. It is fun to see them take on opportunities and to do and come up with things even better than you were able to do. I think the only thing you can be sure of is change and that things never stay the same. When others take what you have helped them achieve to an even better place, it is a great thing to see.

P6 added to this by stating, "It is the best part of my job. I love seeing others succeed." P11 noted personal satisfaction saying, "I love to see those who follow succeed. It makes me happy. To see them doing well is most always a win-win for the company." P4 stated that it's "a sense of accomplishment to see the overall growth of the staff." P1 claimed, "It affirms that leadership is on the right track." P3 expanded on this saying, "It makes me look good. People look at how followers grow and succeed, which inspires other to join this team." This, as P4 referred to the success of followers, "stimulates the leader achievement attitude." As P3 wrote, this success flows from "Alignment and ability to generate results, independent thinking, and new ideas flow to the top." P9 noted that when a follower succeeds, "their success becomes a positive for all involved." P9 wrote that seeing followers succeed, "gives me fulfillment and satisfaction in my work."

Building a positive organizational community. P1 noted that success "creates a positive environment that is critical to success. It is easier to lead in a positive environment." P14 discussed how the role of a leader changed in this environment by noting, "My role becomes more of an integrator than a task manager. I focus more on bringing people together to develop and share ideas, rather than ride them for results." P14 supported this idea by saying, "With the proper environment, great ideas are the lifeline of a long-term, successful organization." P7 reflected on the strength of community stating, "We are stronger as a whole than as individuals." P10 added to this stating, "You are able to leverage your time in places you are strong and hopefully you see and add members to your team that are strong where you are weak to create a stronger team." P12 addressed the community as a cycle stating, "I think leaders should have regard for the team, and the team a high level of regard for the leader and work very hard to truly "see" each other." P1 noted a positive community "is critical to success. It is easier to lead in a positive

environment." P9 stated that a positive environment allows for "Win-win situations, which makes the organization sustainable." P7 addressed the topic of belonging stating, "Not everyone has the chance in a work setting to be seen and appreciated. That is all everyone wants and needs." P7 went on to say when followers feel as if they belong, "I know they will speak up and bring up new ideas to help me if I am not understanding; this relieves pressure and helps people be themselves; it also leads to a fun work environment."

Followers becoming creative and innovative. The validated leader is able to realize creativity and innovation as P11 discussed, "The more creativity and innovation they have, the better idea's we come up with." P12 expanded on this stating, "Creativity and innovation have a snowball effect and creates a culture of openness and innovation, it raises the boat for everyone, and everyone wins." P7 added to this noting, "Letting people be creative and innovative makes people more vested and brings a feeling of ownership." On the topic of innovation, P13 noted, "Innovation and creativity aren't particularly my strengths so when someone else has them it just makes us a more complete team." P1 stated, "Independent thought and creativity are sought after in my field." P6 added that, "I feel like I am more creative and innovative if people that are creative and innovative surround me." P2 argued that, "It inspires me. Every smart leader looks for this in every hire he/she makes. Creativity is at the heart of what our firm is about."

Relationships built upon trust and loyalty. P10 noted, "Trust is key to any relationship and it works both ways. As trust is built, it only strengthens your team." P8 discussed the trusted validated leader as one whose followers "Can open up to, creating open communication." P14 added to this saying, "When they trust me as a team leader, generally the input that they give is productive and positive. The changes they suggest are less emotionally charged and more geared toward helping the company being more productive." This trust leads to loyalty. P3 stated, "They will look out for the best interests of the leader and organization, they will tell you the truth and communicate openly with you without fear." P8 noted that this loyalty matters because "If they understand and believe in the mission and can independently help build our business then I've succeeded." P11 went on adding, "It's always good to have loyal people working with you. You know they have your back when you need them." P12 noted that loyalty is more than to a person, and the benefit is when, "followers are loyal to principle than to an individual." P14 expanded on this stating that when trusted, it "Makes my role easy, and we are able to retain better talent."

When there is trust and loyalty P13 wrote, "They won't be fighting against me; we'll be performing as a team." P4 added, "Trust creates loyalty and cohesiveness among the team." P9 said trust leads to better relations, "Loyalty builds trust in both directions, improving transparency, openness, feedback, and joy." P11 added, "When there is trust and loyalty work doesn't feel like work." According to P1, trust leads to "supportive relationships that improve the product." P7 noted that these relationships causes one to be "open to others' thoughts and who they are as individuals." P6 summed this up by saying:

When people are loyal it makes me feel like I want to do more for them. When they are disloyal I feel like energy is wasted because I have to look over my shoulder and deal with all kinds of soap opera-like nonsense. people are loyal we can focus on business and creating value.

P2 noted that, "We all benefit because we waste time dealing with the negativity of 'non-trust.'" Otherwise, incredible time, energy, and resources are wasted on dealing with non-trust, which has nothing to do with building a successful business." P4 went on to state that trust "fosters a more loyal and rounded team approach." P5 added:

Trust is one of the hardest things to get and easiest to lose. As they trust you that they have the freedom to make decisions, followers make them without you, the outcomes are as good as, and sometimes even better than if you were involved.

P6 added, "When there is trust there is no drama day-to-day. We can go farther and do more things when there is trust."

Attribute 2

The second attribute within the theoretical finding was freedom from management. The different themes that formed the attribute freedom from management were, as followers grow as leaders themselves, as followers become independent, and as followers become capable of being empowered.

As followers grow as leaders themselves. P1 stated, "As they grow, followers become leaders themselves. Followers can become relied upon as partners. Their different perspectives can enhance a team." P7 claimed that it goes to building on strengths, stating:

I am helping to create an environment of independency growing to interdependency. Just that process of life is great and people are genuinely accepted for who they are and thus genuinely appreciated for who they are. It's about seeing them for their strengths and helping them develop their strengths.

P14 stated that, "I am genuinely excited for the associate when they grow as an individual. My hope is that at some point, they may become better than I am." As P6 discussed, "When followers' grow, the conversations get more interesting and we can solve more problems together." P6 added, "When I can meet the needs of followers I feel like they are fully engaged and really want to be part of things." This growth occurs, as P5 stated, when the leader, "Tries to focus on taking stress away from our associates so that they can be more involved in the whole process." It is fulfilling for the leader to see this growth as P8 noted, "I am impacted when I can watch people around me grow individually. To help them gain the tools and the confidence in their own abilities is the purpose of real leadership." P10 wrote, "As followers grow they then become able to take on added

responsibilities and even leadership roles, which then frees me to leverage my time more effectively." P10 stated that when followers grow, "It helps me grow and learn. I only hope others learn a quarter of what I learn from them."

P5 reflected on leading teams stating, "As the teams grow it has given me opportunity to move to other opportunities in the company." P7 wrote, "As they grow everyone grows, there are things I learn from them as much as they learn from me. The more we all know, the more the opportunities there are for the company and everyone grows." P5 added that as followers grow, "It creates the opportunity to grow yourself with different opportunities." P1 claimed that as followers grow, "It makes me a better leader. Their example inspires me personally, a follower's success inspires others on the team." P5 noted, "With associates growth and development my role becomes easier."

P11 also discussed this stating, "I really feel the more the follower learns and grows the easier the job for the leader." According to P4, another aspect comes from followers "developing a sense of thinking outside of the box and extending their ability to grow within the organization." P13 added to this stating:

> As followers grow from studying and applying correct principles, they begin to worry less about their social standing and focus more on what's effective and real. This makes the leadership role much easier because I can focus on how to help move things forward rather than on damage control from social and emotional immaturity.

This growth leads to success as P4 claimed, "It provides an opportunity for excellent succession planning within our company."

As followers become independent. P1 wrote, "I see this as the goal of leadership: to have followers capable and willing to operate under less guidance." P13 went on to say that "If truly independent, they will be much more effective. Once they are truly comfortable within they can look outward. There is much more capacity for greater results because less time is required to change paradigms."

P8 noted that such feelings lead to "freeing up my time to help others." P14 stated, "Associates that have their needs met, will perform at a higher level, they will be happier, they will contribute more." P14 went on to state, "I am able to accomplish more as a team leader. It allows me to focus more on items that are important long term." P2 also discussed this as freeing time to focus noting, "It gives me the opportunity to follow other pursuits like expanding the business. It provides time for me to grow relationships with our stakeholders and customers." P11 stated that, "It makes my job easier, it makes for better confidence in the direction we choose to go." P3 added to this by writing that there is, "more time to dedicate to bigger issues." In addition, P5 stated, "The time you would be using to take care of the little things that take up your day are eliminated and you can focus on the things that make life for all easier, fire prevention instead of firefighting." P6 also addressed having time freed up saying, "More independence is a great thing, if people can

solve their own problems it means we can move on to other things. I don't have to be involved in every little detail for progress to happen." P11 noted that, "Your job becomes easier because they don't need to be told what to do and need much less supervision." P14 added, "I am able to focus more on the important items that need to get done." P5 noted that this "Makes my life easier every day and it is exciting to see the changes or improvements that are coming together." P4 noted that it "provides the ability to facilitate organizational development without having to micromanage the business and staff." As followers become independent, P8 noted that it, "helps me to see things I might not see, and perhaps courage to do something I wouldn't have done." In addition, P8 noted, "Independence is beautiful. As those I help gain independence and grow there is an opportunity for me to learn from them."

As followers become capable of being empowered. P3 stated that empowered followers "create a dynamic organization where people feel motivated, empowered and assume ownership." Capable followers, according to P3, lead to "more alignment, ability to delegate and empower, and more feedback." P1 addressed the benefits to empowerment stating, "Accountability is increased in a positive way; quality and outcomes are generally better." P5 added, "If followers believe in what they are doing to make a difference, the environment becomes magical and a great place to be." P13 wrote that the basis for empowerment comes from, "Recognizing each other's strengths and applying them where they make the most difference." P10 summed it up by saying, "You don't have to micro-manage anything, you do your job and team members do their jobs and things get done in an effective/synergistic way." P4 noted that "It provides a better sense of confidence in the decision making process." P9 noted that when followers can be empowered, "It is liberating and fulfilling." P7 noted that as followers are empowered, "My role becomes a lot less, I let them go and just know things will get done. Now I move to that role as an interpersonal supporter hoping to get them to that level."

DISCUSSION

The emergent theoretical finding discovered in the data analysis was: leaders realize personal benefits from serving the needs of followers. The attributes that formed the theoretical finding were validation as a leader and freedom from management. The theoretical finding emerged from the writings of the 14 participants that took part in the study. The theoretical finding and the two attributes appear to demonstrate how the self-interest of a leader benefits by serving followers.

The first attribute, validation as a leader, supports Greenleaf's (1977/2002) argument of legitimate power that comes to the leader as a gift from one's followers. To be validated as a leader involves the realization that one's followers perceive them as a legitimate leader (Greenleaf, 1996). The validated leader is one whose followers desire to serve his or her needs and carry out the vision (Patterson, 2003; Winston, 2003). In addition, the validated leader is one whose followers become innovative and creative thus benefiting both the leader and the organization (Liden et al., 2014).

The second attribute, freedom from management, aligns with Greenleaf's (1977/2002) claim that those served are more likely to become servant leaders. As followers are served they grow as leaders, they are then ready to be empowered and delegated to (Patterson, 2003). Leaders move beyond the role of direct supervision by serving their followers in a way that they can grow, thus developing self-efficacy (Spears, 2010; Winston, 2003). When followers are empowered and capable, leaders are then free to take on new challenges and opportunities (Ndoye et al., 2010).

These attributes are in-line with servant leadership writings claiming that the servant leader eventually transcends their role to become stewards of the organization (Block, 2013; Greenleaf, 1977/2002; Spears, 2010). This transcendence leads to the leader's self-actualization (Conley, 2007; Maslow, 1965). The benefit to being a self-actualized leader is the realization of greater authority, strength, and success (Greenleaf, 1996; Russell, 2016; Sendjaya, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The theoretical finding of this study advances the understanding of servant leadership philosophy by discovering the benefits to one's self-interest from being a servant leader. The researchers identified a theoretical concept that supports Russell's (2016) claim that there seems to almost always be a tangible and/or intangible benefit to both leader and follower resulting from the servant leader-servant follower relationship.

The implication of the theoretical finding is twofold. First, is its ability to address the realized self-interest, which results from being a servant leader (Feldman, 2014). The second is its possibility for reducing the skepticism surrounding the philosophy that it is one-sided servitude that only benefits those served by the leader (Denning, 2010; Heskett, 2013; Monroe, 2013).

This study is limited to the data collected from the 14 participants in the form of a written questionnaire. The questionnaire did not allow the researchers to ask follow-up questions or seek clarification to answers. Moreover, the questionnaire did not allow for discovering how these leaders arrived at their position of leadership, whether they envisioned themselves as a servant leader, or how they may have benefited from a servant leader in their career. The researchers recommend future studies that utilize interviews with participants. In addition, the researchers recommend future studies that recruit participants in order to discover when they themselves realized they were becoming a servant leader, as well as what type of leader they desired to be.

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