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## HOW SERVANT LEADERSHIP IS PERCEIVED BY LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS IN A PORTUGUESE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

### *AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS*

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## **Abstract**

Servant leadership theory has been the subject of great academic discussion, namely in what concerns reaching a consensus for its definition. As many frameworks have been designed in order to define the servant leader's characteristics, we based ourselves in van Dierendonck's review and synthesis on servant leadership (2011) to assess how it is perceived in a Portuguese organizational context. After performing several interviews in a private health care organization, we conclude that the perception of servant leadership is generally positive and that its characteristics seem to be in line with academic literature. However, some issues arose such as a seemingly lack of relevance given to authenticity and humility, the latter being a unique attribute of servant leadership. Also, we found a discrepancy between hierarchical levels' perception of servant leadership characteristics as well as questioning if an over emphasis on service can diminish the servant leader's impact on organizational performance.

**Keywords:** servant leadership, characteristics, perception

## **I. Introduction**

In May 2013, Harvard emeritus professor James L. Heskett wrote an article entitled “Why Isn’t ‘Servant Leadership’ More Prevalent?” (2013) where he finished with a question, asking “if servant leadership is as effective as portrayed in recent research, why isn’t it more prevalent?”. In a follow-up article where he reflected about readers’ opinion, he asked whether the term is or is not an oxymoron. In some ways, this shows how servant leadership has been the subject of great discussion in recent literature.

First defined by Robert K. Greenleaf in his seminal essay “The Servant as Leader” (1970), servant leadership has since been included as a subject of discussion among leadership studies and compared to other leadership styles such as authentic, spiritual and transformational leadership. From the end of the last century, many scholars have elaborated studies in order to define a valuable framework of servant leadership characteristics (Spears, 1995; Laub, 1999; Page and Wong, 2000; Russell & Stone, 2002; Patterson, 2003; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Wong & Davey, 2007; Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Papers and articles have been included in prestigious journals such as *Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of Business and Psychology* and *Journal of Management*. Moreover, servant leadership has been described as an intriguing new field of study for management researchers and a leadership theory with great potential (van Dierendonck, 2011), being applicable in a variety of cultures, contexts, and organizational settings (Parris and Peachey, 2013) and also that it is the most recent people-centered leadership (de Wall & Sivro, 2012).

However, in a review and synthesis on servant leadership, van Dierendonck (2011) recalled that “most of what has been written about servant leadership has been

prescriptive, mainly focusing on how it should ideally be” while “only a few have been descriptive—and inform us about what is happening in practice” and that “there is a compelling need for validated empirical research building on a theoretical model that incorporates the key insights learned from research until now”. Thus, the aim of this work project is to offer a qualitative analysis to how servant leadership is perceived by leaders and followers in a Portuguese organizational context. In order to do this, we focused in answering this question within a Portuguese private health care organization, since Portugal has been considered a country where servant leadership is an applicable model, despite possible culturally biased perceptions of good leadership (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014) and considerable power distance levels (Hofstede, n.d.). In fact, we believe that the relevance of this work being performed in a Portuguese organizational context is due to a potential paradox. This paradox tells us that servant leadership can be recognized as a valued style in an environment that is considered to have characteristics whose perception might not always be associated with this leadership theory. Relying on Geert Hofstede’s analysis and 6-D Model© on Portugal (n.d.), we find characteristics such as collectivism, in which the individual is extremely bonded to the group and it can disable servant leadership attitudes in environments where it is not recognized as useful nor valid; uncertainty avoidance, which can reveal intolerance to change and innovation while relying on extremely rigid sets of rules; low long term orientation which focuses on short term results achievement, whereas servant leadership is characterized by the requirement of time to establish itself; a culture of restraint, which tends to be cynic and pessimistic, two attributes which are not in conformity with servant leadership values. On the other side, Portugal is considered to be a feminine country, which enhances values such as caring for others and well-being, which are easily related to servant leadership.

These aspects give us the certainty that Portuguese organizational contexts represent an interesting set to pursue studies on servant leadership. Furthermore, this work aims at evaluating the characteristics that are associated with servant leaders, based on leader and follower's perception as well as on the premise that servant leadership and leadership effectiveness are significantly and positively correlated (McCuddy & Cavin, 2008). Another aspect of this work project is that it was performed in a health care organization, where there is a culture that can be perceived as being naturally inclined to serve due to business influence. We hope these findings will contribute to arouse enthusiasm and foster leadership study in Portugal.

We will firstly go through a review of the most relevant literature on servant leadership. Then we will give an overview of the research setting and explain the methodology used to perform the analysis. We will present and discuss the work project's findings on how servant leadership is perceived by leaders and followers in a Portuguese organizational context. Finally, we will present our work's conclusions and acknowledge its limitations while providing possible directions for future research.

## **II. Literature review on servant leadership**

Servant leadership can be traced back as far as to Lao-Tzu (Heskett, 2013), Plato (Williamson, 2008) and Jesus Christ (Russell, 2003). However, its starting point as an academic subject was in 1970 when Greenleaf described the servant leader as follows:

*“The Servant Leader is servant first (...). It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. (...) The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served*

*grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived?” (Greenleaf, 1970).*

The author also says that the servant leader “is sharply different from the person who is leader-first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power to drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a latter choice to serve – after leadership is established. (...) The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served“. Later theory asserted that servant leaders have their focus on followers as their “behaviors and attitudes are congruent with this follower focus” (Patterson, 2003) and their leadership style contributes to the development of positive attitudes in followers (Sendjaya et al.). Likewise, based on follower abilities, needs and inputs, servant leaders tend to make work dynamic and ‘tailor made’ (van Dierendonck, 2011). Finally, there is an underlying motivational aspect as servant leadership operationalization is reflected by a “need to serve combined with a motivation to lead” (van Dierendonck, 2011).

Even though Greenleaf’s essay is considered to be thought-provoking (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006), it is commonly agreed that he did not leave a definitive definition and theoretical framework of servant leadership, the ultimate result being that there is no consensus on it, something that was attempted to settle only recently (van Dierendonck, 2011). Thus, “the lack of an accurate definition of servant leadership by Greenleaf has given rise to many interpretations exemplifying a wide range of behaviors” (van Dierendonck, 2011). Our work project relies essentially on frameworks developed by

many scholars. While we do not want to state all existing frameworks, we wish to present some we have considered most relevant for our analysis.

For instance Laub (1999) defined servant leadership with six main characteristics that are building community; developing people; displaying authenticity; providing leadership; sharing leadership and valuing people. Patterson (2003) had another judgment on the matter with seven characteristics which he referred to as virtues that are agapao love; altruism; empowerment; humility; trust; vision and service. Furthermore Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) developed a scale for servant leadership in which they acknowledged altruistic calling, emotional healing, organizational stewardship, persuasive mapping and wisdom as main characteristics. Relating servant leadership to positive psychology, Wong & Davey (2007) who said that servant leadership was a radical humanistic and spiritual approach (instead of rational and mechanistic) developed a conceptual model based upon two previous ones (Page & Wong, 2000; Wong & Page, 2003) in which they settled what they believed to be the concept's best practices: humility & selflessness; serving and developing others; consulting and involving others; inspiring and influencing others; modeling integrity and authenticity. Liden et al. (2008) admitted that "servant leadership is based on the premise that to bring out the best in their followers, leaders rely on one-on-one communication to understand the abilities, needs, desires, goals, and potential of those individuals" and that they "assist followers in achieving their potential". This led them to create a seven-dimension scale for servant leadership consisting in behaving ethically; conceptual skills; creating value for the community; emotional healing; empowerment; helping subordinates grow and succeed and putting subordinates first. Sendjaya et al. (2008) argued that servant leadership appears to be "more relevant and timely in the present context than other value-laden leadership" approach and related



servant leadership with a six behavior scale that encompassed transforming influence; voluntary subordination; authentic self; transcendental spirituality; covenantal relationship and responsible morality. Finally, van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) developed the servant leadership survey whose characteristics were based upon insights from existing literature as well as from interviews with managers. The eight characteristics measure consisted in empowerment; humility; standing back; accountability; forgiveness; courage; authenticity and stewardship.

As can be seen, many of these sets of characteristics are highly similar, although each one has its specificities and as van Dierendonck specified, “there are clear overlaps (...) in the different models” (2011). However, the author attempted to define six characteristics which “form an operationalized definition of servant leadership grounded in the different conceptual models as described in the literature” (van Dierendonck, 2011), in which all behaviors are encompassed (appendix A). They are:

- **Empowering and developing people**, which “aims at fostering a proactive, self-confident attitude among followers and gives them a sense of personal power” (van Dierendonck, 2011);
- **Humility**, which “shows in the extent to which a leader puts the interest of others first, facilitates their performance, and provides them with essential support” (van Dierendonck, 2011);
- **Interpersonal acceptance**, which “includes the perspective-taking element of empathy that focuses on being able to cognitively adopt the psychological perspectives of other people and experience feelings of warmth, compassion, and forgiveness in terms of concern for others even when confronted with offences, arguments, and mistakes” (van Dierendonck, 2011);

- **Providing direction**, which “is about providing the right degree of accountability, which has been suggested as a salient dimension of high-quality dyadic interpersonal relations” (Ferris et al., 2009);
- **Stewardship**, which “is the willingness to take responsibility for the larger institution and to go for service instead of control and self-interest” (Block, 1993; Spears, 1995);
- **Authenticity**, which “is about being true to oneself, accurately representing—privately and publicly—internal states intentions, and commitments” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Of all these characteristics, humility seems to be the one that is exclusive and essential to servant leaders. As scholars noted, servant leadership “addresses phenomena – such as altruism towards followers and humility – that are unexplained by other leadership theories” (Patterson, 2003); humility is considered an essential virtue “unique to the servant leader initial motivation to serve” (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014); “humility forms the essential backbone of the servant leader” and it is “the fundamental foundation of the servant-first leader” (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2015).

However, it is arguable if servant leadership or at least the characteristics with which it is associated are always effective. Also, characteristics are closely associated with personal values and some defend that there is “a leadership crisis because self-interest motivates many leaders” (Russell, 2001). Thus it is reasonable to ask the question: aren’t non-servant leaders also effective? In a time where there is “demand for more ethical, people-centered management” (van Dierendonck, 2011), Stanford professor Jeffrey Pfeffer goes as far as saying that “sometimes (...) doing precisely the opposite of what the leadership industry prescribes produces better outcomes” (2015b). Regarding servant leadership, Pfeffer believes it is well intentioned, recalling Starbuck CEO Howard

Schultz's recent call in The New York City Times (2015), but "at a time when CEO salaries have soared to more than 300 times that of their companies' average employees, there's not too much servant leadership going on" (Pfeffer, 2015a).

For instance, on authenticity, Pfeffer said that "the last thing a leader needs to be at crucial moments is 'authentic' (...) being authentic is pretty much the opposite of what leaders must do" and that instead of being true to themselves "leaders need to be true to what the situation and what those around them want and need from them" (Pfeffer, 2015b). Regarding forgiveness the same author regrets that "in today's world, everyone apologizes all the time" arguing that "talk is cheap and people expect actions (...) to ensure that the behavior doesn't happen again" (Pfeffer, 2015c). Social psychologist Larissa Tiedens said that "people confer more status to targets who express anger than to targets who express sadness" because the former expresses power while the latter does not (Tiedens, 2001). Furthermore, if leaders ask for sorry very often it can undercut the feeling of pride that employees have in working for the organization (Pfeffer, 2015c). As to being truthful, the professor recalls that "some of the most revered and wealthiest people mastered the skill of presenting a less than veridical version of reality (...) not admitting to setbacks and presenting a positive spin on every aspect of one's career" (Pfeffer, 2015a). This is the case for instance of Steve Jobs, who would deliberately distort the truth in order to attain greater commitment from his followers, a phenomenon known as 'reality distortion field' (Hertzfeld, 2005).

Finally, we do not aim to prove that servant leadership is the leader's only successful path. Professor Jim Heskett said that "servant leadership is only one approach to leading, and it isn't for everyone" (2013). But as we mentioned earlier, we do believe that servant

leadership, when fostered from within a company, can be a path of great success for followers, leaders, organizations as a whole as well as for the common good.

### **III. The research setting**

The company chosen for this work project is a Portuguese organization that operates in the private health care industry. As one of the industry's top players experiencing a period of growth, it covers a large part of Portuguese territory from the Center to the North, where it operates both hospitals and clinics offering a wide range of medical services. Interviewees were chosen only amongst management and corporate services, thus there were no physicians, nurses or administrative staff interviewed. Interviews were made to a sample of twenty interviewees, from which thirteen work in corporate positions while the remaining seven work in hospital units. As for the interviewees' sex, six were female and fourteen were male. Interviewees were divided in five hierarchical levels consisting in: 1. administrators; 2. large hospital directors; 3. first level corporate leaders; 4. smaller hospital directors and second level corporate leaders; 5. young managers<sup>1</sup>. Between level 4 and 5 is where we find greater power distance.

The organization is considered to have a culture with a Christian matrix which is reflected in the values it holds, namely those of respect for the dignity of the human person as well as serving others. We make the assumption that the organization's leaders' values significantly affect followers and ultimately influence organizational performance (Russell, 2001). Moreover, servant leadership is recognized as good in itself as well as a recurrent practice in the organization by both leaders and followers.

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<sup>1</sup> These levels do not reflect real life hierarchies

#### **IV. Methodology**

The purpose of this work project is to perform a qualitative assessment on how servant leadership is perceived by leaders and followers in a Portuguese organizational context. The decision not to conduct a quantitative analysis is because the interest of this work resides in understanding if servant leaders are or not accepted in a particular organizational setting, rather than validating any kind of multidimensional analysis. Quantitative analysis will certainly be of greater use in future research. Hence, we performed semi-structured interviews (appendix B) in order to better grasp the interviewee's perception on servant leadership and eventually search for emergent patterns. The interpretation of perceptions must not be understood as an objective truth but rather as a search for plausibility (Silva et al., 2014). The interviews started with an explanation of the aim of the study and a brief introduction of the 'servant leadership' term. In order not to create any bias on the interviewee's perception we presented him with Greenleaf's aforementioned definition which is also quite broad and to avoid interviewees to try to comply with the interviewer's expectations, it was clearly stated that their personal perception was the main interest of the study. Rather than a way to control the interview, we explained that the questionnaire that followed the introduction was merely indicative so that interviewees were given total freedom to express themselves on their perception of servant leadership. Interviews lasted from fifteen to thirty minutes and were recorded and transcribed in Portuguese since it was the native language from both the interviewer and interviewees. Standard questions focused on the perception of the characteristics recognized in servant leaders; their strengths and weaknesses according to the interviewee's experience; if they are recognizable in their workplace; if the organization's culture fosters these behaviors; concrete situations where

servant leadership was clear and which are the advantages of servant leadership in the business world as a whole. It must be said that rather than assessing if servant leadership is applied or not in the organization, questions were an instrument to go more in depth in each characteristic that was named. The interviews happened in a time span of two weeks and a half and after this initial phase, we underwent through a meticulous process of extracting all relevant sections of the interviews to an Excel document. These included servant leader characteristics and their description, a description of the servant leader, servant leadership strengths and threats and stories where servant leadership was cognizable. This enabled us to make our servant leadership characteristics' analysis.

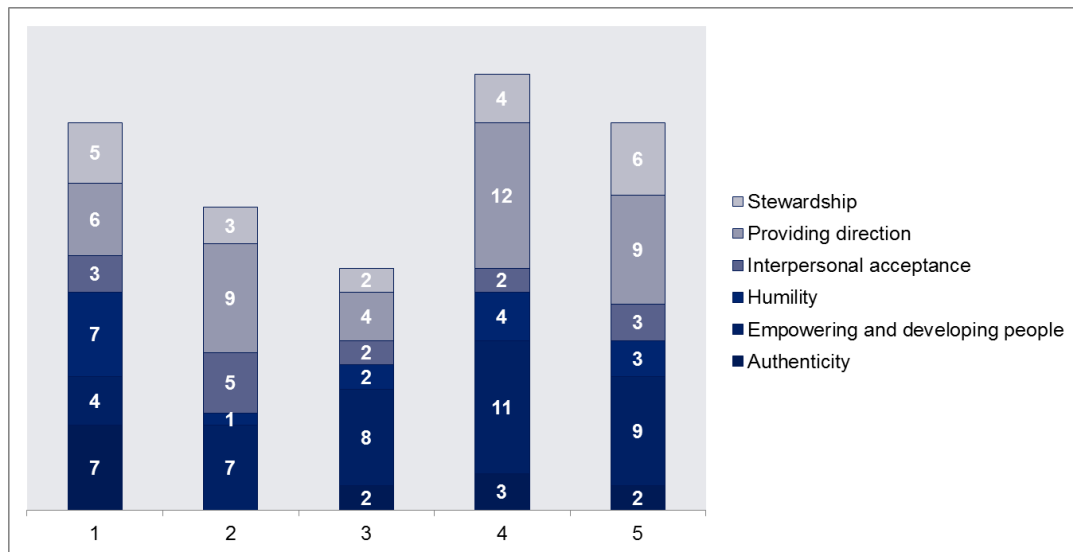
In order to perform a qualitative approach, we used the data structure methodology described in Silva et al. (2014). This methodology enabled us to go from information contained in individual interviews to more broad and abstract concepts (appendix C). It is divided into first, second and third order concepts. First order concepts are all those characteristics that were taken directly from interviews while second order concepts are a first attempt at clustering. This could be done by grouping first order concepts that were clearly related to each other, for example 'joy', 'positive' and 'empathy' were put together. From these groups we extracted that which was the most relevant characteristic in interviews to be the second order concept. Finally we reach third order concepts or "overarching dimensions". In order to relate the characteristics with relevant literature and because it was possible to do so, we used van Dierendonck's six characteristics which define summarily servant leadership (2011). Thus we grouped second order concepts into the six aforementioned servant leadership characteristics.

## **V. Findings**

From our interviews we extracted 145 references of a total of fifty two different characteristics which became our first order concepts. These were reduced to a total of fifteen second order concepts which when grouped formed six overarching dimensions. While all characteristics could be related to the aforementioned frameworks (Laub, 1999; Patterson, 2003; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Wong & Davey, 2007; Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), twelve of them were identical or at least very similar to scholars' characteristics: courage, empowerment, growth, people development, vision, impact in community, humility, altruism, love, persuasion, authenticity and trust. Characteristics such as awareness, foresight, authority, listening, empathy, persuasion and growth can be traced back to seminal works (Greenleaf, 1970; Spears, 1975).

'Providing direction' and 'empowerment and developing people' seem to be the dimensions that are most perceived for servant leaders (appendix D). Relevant characteristics included role model, vision, listening, people development, motivation, empowerment and growth. In fact, one interviewee said that "recent studies show that when so-called generation millennium is asked about what they privilege in organizations, the most common answer is 'to have leaders with whom I can learn'". The remaining dimensions, 'interpersonal acceptance', 'stewardship', 'humility' and 'authenticity' were much less referenced as servant leadership attributes. Moreover, there was a predominant perception of 'action-oriented' notions such as empowerment and providing direction in contrast with 'service-oriented' notions such as humility (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2015).

The chart below shows the frequency of dimensions in each hierarchical level:



As can be seen, each hierarchical level seems to have their differences and similarities in terms of what is their perception on servant leadership. For instance we can see that levels 4 and 5 have quite similar perceptions, despite their real life power distance. Level 3 leaders followed a similar pattern but giving more relevance to ‘empowering and developing people’. As to level 2 interviewees, they did not mention characteristics related to ‘authenticity’, giving preference to ‘providing direction’ and ‘empowering and developing people’ dimensions. Finally, level 1 interviewees stand out as they have a more balanced result of each dimensions’ references, as well as gathering more references to ‘authenticity’ and ‘humility’ than other interviewees.

Overall, interviewees agreed that servant leadership is a valid style. One hospital unit director even said that “the profile of a leader must always be that of a servant in order for the company to be sustainable in the long term”. Some revealed skepticism not to servant leadership in particular, but rather to leadership definitions arguing that leaders cannot be servant or authoritarians all the time, which echoes Pfeffer’s previously mentioned assertions. One said that “leadership styles cannot be dogmatic” but he also



stressed that a servant leader who “acts in different ways doesn't make him less servant”. This means that servant leaders are aware that leading is a service, whether they are nice or demanding, decision makers or information sharers. We will hereby give an overview of each dimension as defined by the interviewees.

*Authenticity:* “To be a servant leader is not always simple”, stated an administrator, it requires work and reflection in order to avoid natural selfishness and focus on serving others and the organization before oneself. For instance, one corporate leader said that not all can be servant leaders and sometimes “companies have career progressions that go through being a leader”, which can be a threat to servant leadership. This person acknowledged that “organizations should have careers that are divided between technical and leader”. This enables servant leaders to emerge naturally, as another corporate leader said, “authority is spontaneously conferred to the servant leader due to his role model capability and certain behaviors (...) [he] is a stronger and more interesting leader” who “creates more value added to the ecosystem where he is inserted”. Finally, servant leaders were referred to as people who are “coherent in their personal and professional lives”, where they have “the same attitudes, the same standards and the same behaviors”. This creates trustful relationships within the organization, which can be “bombastic for performance”. One administrator said that “if there is no trusting environment, the servant leader can be ignored (...) he becomes a worse leader. Environment must be one where I don't become self-defeating”.

*Empowering and developing people:* Contrary to installed environments “servant leadership results in a more positive excitement environment” as the leader “is the one who empowers people's qualities and development the most”. A hospital director stated

that the servant leader is close to those he serves, thus he “is aware of the available human resources he has to reach a certain objective” which enables him to give constructive feedback. Motivation is seen as the great strength of the servant leader; he “tends to make things happen” and to do that “he must understand what the strengths in each person are so that they grow and the organization grows with those potentials”. Furthermore “motivation has direct impact on results (...) [and it] brings positive consequences such as a good working environment and happiness”. This seems to be in accordance with a hospital unit director who stressed the importance of motivation in servant leadership as well as promoting platforms such as brainstorming activities where everyone gives their opinion in various subjects. Yet, an administrator warned that exciting environments can become “difficult to manage” because they are “less organized”. Despite that, a corporate leader said that “organizations can have everything organized, (...) but if it cannot motivate its people then it can have a fatal destiny”. The servant leaders can also have the temptation “to do the work for others instead of empowering them” and consequently he might “get lost in details while losing sight of the whole”. This brings the need that “every focus on the people must be aligned with the organization's needs”. Moreover, young managers named many situations where their leaders would spend time with them, listen to them and give feedback in order to make them grow in the organization.

*Humility:* “The servant leader doesn't need to have fear of being humble; he can admit that he might not always make the best choice and ask for help”, is what a corporate leader said. However, he also stated that the servant leader “must be confident with what he does”, which contrasts with a distorted vision of humility that “leads to inaction”. In fact, a young manager said that “some people might understand humility as a leader who demeans himself”, while an administrator stated that there is the danger of a non-effective

humility by which the leader “sets aside and hides”. As such, “the servant leader cannot forget his role as leader and when he is also a servant, there might be a tendency to mix roles”. However, “humility is what strengthens the servant leader, while the lack of humility is what weakens the authoritarian” and “it is one of the main criterions that differentiate leadership from authority”. Furthermore, an administrator described humility as a “clever way to act better”. One person associated humility with the Christian perspective of service, but reinforced that “this doesn't mean the person is always working with his followers as equals” because “it might create a blurry impression of who is in charge”. Finally, humility was related to the image of “an invisible maestro who contributes to extract the best of each in harmony with the whole (...) who shines less and is more concentrated in the orchestra”.

*Interpersonal acceptance:* “Servant leadership is focused on the individual and its liberation”, as an administrator said, “a company who takes care of its employees, will take better care of its clients”. Necessary characteristics included empathy which “is important in order to create trustful relationships” as well as being humane, “when leaders put themselves in the place of others helping them to find solutions to their problems, they become much more understanding towards others' difficulties”, although there is “the risk of losing a little bit of strategy”. There is a “humanizing side of management“, that “makes business activity much more individualized” and where there is “an active search for proximity with people”. Both an administrator and a young manager mentioned love relating it to an essay by Portuguese lawyer António Pinto Leite called “Love as a Management Criterion” (2012). One said that “the servant leader loves those with whom he works, thus he is very demanding with them and tries to bring the best from each one to the surface, just like a father towards his child”. On the other side, it was stated that

“the servant leader gets too much emotionally involved with the people he works with” and this proximity leads to more demanding relationships and it can also bring greater pain. A young manager stated that too much proximity between servant leaders and followers “can create a wrong idea that they are at a same level, thus have too much confidence and eventually he might even lose respect”. Moreover, tolerance for others will necessarily require heterogeneous environments which “are more difficult to manage than homogeneous environments”, according to an administrator. One hospital unit director said that based upon the values of respect for human dignity and human development they were able to develop many human resource policies directed to employees affected by the economic crisis.

*Providing direction:* “Servant leadership is the most effective way to inspire all individuals towards a high service performance for all stakeholders” as it has advantages against forced leadership because of the skills with which servant leaders “are recognized regardless of his technical capacities” (which include listening, empowering, decision making, communication, persuasion). Perhaps the most relevant characteristic from this dimension is to be a role model, which “strengthens servant leadership”. One second level corporate leader said that in his teams he makes an effort to give “examples of leadership by being a role model, so that they feel prepared to lead further on”. Role model also comes from leader experience and the capacity to convey knowledge to those they lead. As for vision, “effective servant leadership has the vision to provide good training to employees while (...) keeping them aligned with the needs of the organization”. It is also important that top leadership does not lose vision, as “service mission must be preserved” at every level of the organization. Notably, if top leaders “are servant leaders, they pass a message to other leaders which replicate this leadership model downwards”. Finally to

provide direction also includes what a corporate leader said: “I am working to become dispensable”, that is to ensure replacement and thus “every good leader should know that if the next day they weren't to lead anymore, there would be someone assuming the task to lead naturally”. Although paternalism can be depicted as “giving responsibility and freedom to the organizations’ leaders” it can also be a threat when in need of making hard decisions such as firing people, the “servant leader has the risk of taking more time (...) and this can send the wrong message to others, a message of accommodation”. Also, “the fact that these leaders take into consideration so many variables when taking decisions can lead them to take wrong decisions, allowing for emotions to obfuscate them in the time to decide”. Furthermore, “although the servant leader must have a different rhythm for each of his team members, he cannot lose sight of strategic vision due to small details”.

*Stewardship:* One interviewee emphasized that the servant leader is in service of the organization and he must not be afraid of being in charge, in opposition to the risk of giving “more emphasis to serve than to lead” and eventually stop leading. Hence stewardship is seen as an important quality by which the leader can effectively lead the organization while serving. An administrator said that common good is “number one in the hierarchy of values” which implies that people “give themselves to their neighbors” and a young manager admitted that the servant leader “must have a positive impact in the community in which he is inserted”. For instance, “the servant leader knows that companies do not only survive with results and profits (...) it also subsists due to the relationships it has with the community and consumers, as well as the message it conveys outside”. One of the main assets servant leaders have is communication skills, as he “has the capacity to adapt to what the others can listen to, so that what is said is always for the benefit of the listener”. This is also true in periods of strong company growth where

“people development might not be a priority for everyone” and servant leadership “requires explicit communication as well as training”. Moreover, stating the fact that humans tend to mimic each other, one interviewee said that “servant leadership has a positive contamination effect in the business world”. Communication is also based on building strong relationships within the organization. Another interviewee argued that the servant leader “is also a good process facilitator (...) he puts his influence at the service of his team in order to reach better results”. Finally, sharing duties, results, information and goals is a strength that enables servant leadership to achieve high performance results. Despite all, many said that there is still a path to pursue until servant leadership is transversal to all the organization.

## **VI. Discussion**

In this section we wish to compare our findings’ content with existing literature about servant leadership. Firstly, the great majority of interviewees were not acquainted with the concept, but none revealed difficulties in understanding it, perhaps due to the association we already mentioned, that service is closely related to the organizations’ Christian-based values. Secondly, all acknowledged that servant leadership is good in itself, but some kept reservations whether if all leaders should be servant leaders all the time although others referred to servant leadership as the only way to lead in nowadays’ companies. But we wish to stress that all found positive elements in servant leadership.

‘Authenticity’ characteristics, which were the least referenced, were mainly focused in positive aspects of self-knowledge and inner strength (Wong & Davey, 2007) as well as building trustful (Laub, 1999) and truthful (van Dierendonck, 2011) relationships. However interviewees avoided characteristics that could show some weakness, such as

vulnerability (Luthans & Avolio, 2003) and there was no trace of transcendental spirituality (Sendjaya et al., 2008), since it was not clear that spiritual bonds existed within the organization. Moreover, according to Patterson's definition (2003), trust would be more related to 'provide direction'. However interviewees associated trust mostly with coherence, making it a necessary condition for authentic servant leaders. In fact, Fons Trompenaars (2009), discussing about the servant leader's dilemma between 'being and doing' said that "as a leader you need also to be able to be yourself" and that "successful leaders do things in harmony with who they feel they are and vice versa". Also, there seems to be a positive correlation between interviewees' trust in leaders, organization and their perception of servant leadership (Errol & Winston, 2005).

Interviewees said they believe their organization empowers and develops people; this seems to reflect van Dierendonck's assertion that each one's intrinsic value is a central issue (2011). They recognize attitudes such as providing opportunities for learning and growth (Laub, 1999), making people feel significant (Patterson, 2003), listening to others with openness and involving them in decision-making (Wong & Davey, 2007), leaders making sure followers achieve their career goals and giving freedom to handle situations (Liden et al.), giving the information needed to perform a good work and encouraging the staff to come up with new ideas (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The exercise and detention of power is seen as a positive thing in the sense that it must be used to develop others in first place; this might contrast with the vision of Patterson (2003) where the leader should give the power away to his followers. Also some admitted that personal benefit is inherent to the servant leadership despite Wong & Davey's call to sacrifice self-interest for others (2007). Moreover servant leaders must not substitute themselves in their followers' tasks and responsibilities.

‘Humility’ echoed attitudes such as extensive sharing (Laub, 1999), the ability to keep one’s accomplishments in perspective (Patterson, 2003), altruistic calling (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), putting subordinates first (Liden et al.), learning from others and standing back (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Some admitted the need for leaders to admit mistakes (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), but most depicted the leader as he who corrects mistakes. We noticed that humility was more often referred by top leaders, which seems to be in accordance with Sousa and van Dierendonck’s notion (2015) that “for leaders in high hierarchical positions (...) humility seems to strengthen the impact of their action-oriented leadership”; hence “servant leadership might be particularly effective for leaders in executive and board level positions” while “less humble leaders at the lower levels of the hierarchy still seem able to compensate for this through a strong action-oriented leadership style” which “might suffice in generating engagement”. As a whole there was not much relevance given to humility, which is “the essential backbone of the servant leader” (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2015), leaving doubts if their perception was actually that of servant leadership.

‘Interpersonal acceptance’ found consent considering the organization’s humane orientation. Interviewees told stories that reflected valuing people (Laub, 1999), loving and caring for others (Patterson, 2003; Liden et al., 2008), helping other’s personal traumas and issues (Barbuto & Wheeler) and non-criticizing (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Some mentioned proximity (part of the ‘humane’ characteristic) which is necessary for “being able to cognitively adopt the psychological perspectives of other people” (van Dierendonck, 2011). However, younger managers said that the hierarchical power distance gap disables proximity between administrators and them. Interestingly, forgiveness was not mentioned even once as a servant leader attribute.



While not being utopic, in order to provide direction the servant leader is a visionary who takes initiative (Laub, 1999; Patterson, 2003) and is able to persuade followers to follow his vision (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006) while being a role model on a daily basis (Wong & Davey, 2007); he is a creative person (Liden et al., 2008) and has courage and strong will (van Dierendonck, 2011). However, the execution of authority by the leader may have a difference sense from that of Greenleaf where the leader is servant-first (1970). Some interviewees seem to admit that to be an effective servant, one must lead first. This might happen because the relationship with authority is not “problematic” in Portugal and because power distance is accepted (Hofstede, n.d.). Interviewees also stated time-management as the greatest enemy of servant leadership, which can prevent leaders to establish their servant authority and provide effective direction.

The good of the whole was given greater relevance than individual self-interest (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). This is echoed by an assertion that “if people search for power for the sake of power instead of serving, it can bring growth and development on a short-term basis, but the final result will always be worse off”. Moreover 'stewardship' characteristics such as building community based on strong relationships (Laub, 1999; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006) and the need for ethical leadership with impact on the community (Liden et al. 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) were met. However, many stressed the need for servant leadership to achieve organizational results, stating that leaders must reconsider their leading style if it fails.

Despite our sample' limitations, we wish to make some considerations regarding similarities and differences between hierarchical levels in the organization and their servant leadership perception. In this sense, it would seem that administrators are the most

concerned with ‘authenticity’ and ‘humility’. Thus it appears that more responsibility brings greater acknowledgement of the need for the leader to be humbler, which is quite relevant considering that humility is what distinguishes servant leadership from other leadership styles. This is also in line with Sousa and van Dierendonck who said that “the combination of humility and action seems to be most effective for senior executives” (2015). It can also explain that with time, self-knowledge increases thus authenticity becomes more central. This comes in contrast with level 4 and 5 interviewees, which seem to give more importance to ‘providing direction’ and ‘empowering and developing people’, as we mentioned previously. This can be related to the ambitions they have, that is to be empowered in order to grow while being led by people they perceive as role models. However, level 2 leaders also seem to give these two dimensions greater relevance, as well as level 3 leaders for empowerment and development. As to ‘stewardship’ and ‘interpersonal acceptance’, there doesn’t seem to be relevant differences between hierarchical levels.

## **VII. Conclusion**

We conclude that the perception of servant leadership in this Portuguese organizational context seems to correspond with what literature has defined, with particular relevance for two action-oriented dimensions: ‘empowering and developing people’ and ‘providing direction’. These two aren’t exclusive to servant leadership and the seemingly lack of relevance given to humility, which is the characteristic that differentiates servant leadership from other theories (Patterson, 2003) prevents us from concluding that the perception on servant leadership is entirely accurate, even though it was perceived as a valid leadership style and we were able to map all referred characteristics in van

Dierendonck's dimensions. We also acknowledged some discrepancies amongst hierarchical levels, showing that different hierarchical levels might give relevance to different characteristics (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2015). The organization being a top Portuguese private health player and based upon a general positive perception of servant leadership, we can assume that servant leaders can have a positive impact on Portuguese organizations, despite our previous assertions that Portuguese culture can sometimes be in contradiction with servant leadership characteristics (Hofstede, n.d.) and also that it is questionable if servant leadership perception is accurate due to lack of emphasis on humility. This leads us to the question if instead of servant leadership, the perception might not be that of other theories that are also people-oriented?

One might ask if servant leadership is so warmly received in this organization because of its culture, a factor that is influenced by both humane orientation and power distance (van Dierendonck, 2011). However, if it is true the organization has humane orientation, the same cannot be said of power distance which is considerably high. Furthermore, interviewees stated that there is still much to do in this field for servant leadership to be transversal throughout the organization. Some doubts arose concerning the relationship between servant leadership and performance, when the focus is too much on service. Thus, interviewees acknowledged the danger of getting lost in details while forgetting the good of the whole. It also remained unsure if the servant leader should be servant-first or leader-first in order to better serve the common good.

## **VIII. Limitations and future research**

We wish to acknowledge this work project's limitations, for instance in the fact that the sample is comprised of twenty workers from a large organization which allows us

only to give an overall impression of servant leadership perception. Also, we wish to restate that this work does not aim to offer any kind of quantitative hypothesis testing, but it remains a qualitative approach based on perceptions which also has its own limitations. Furthermore the organization might have a natural tendency for service due to acting in the health care sector and this could also have influenced overall results.

However, we hope this work project will foster interest in this particular subject as we wish to propose future research suggestions such as performing similar studies in organizations from other sectors (universities; banks; construction; manufacturing) and assess if differences between hierarchical levels remain. There might be also some interest in performing a similar analysis in companies that do not have a clear Christian--based values matrix. Also, regarding authenticity, it could be of value to understand how followers' perception is affected by their leaders' lifestyle coherence. Moreover one could study what is the perceived relevance of humility in servant leadership, since it is what differentiates this theory from others. Considering leadership definitions, there could be an attempt to answer the question: what if servant leadership fails? To what extent should we defend a leadership style at the cost of organizational performance? Shouldn't we do like Pfeffer who says that the leader must be true to what the situation requires? Finally, we would like to suggest that a work be performed in order to understand if in Portuguese culture to be a 'leader-first' can have greater impact than to be a 'servant-first' in what serving the common good is concerned.

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