Adapting Servant Leadership to Follower Maturity:
A Dynamic Leadership Approach for a Diverse Environment

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Abstract

Selecting the appropriate style of leadership in different situations or environments remains a contentious topic in any leadership discussion. The theory proposed in this paper attempts to blend core servant leadership attributes with both transactional and transformational leadership styles when viewed through the lens of contingency theory. The selection of leadership style is determined by the professional maturity of the follower, consistent with current thought in situational leadership theory. Central to this is paper is the notion that regardless of the situation that dictates style of leadership, a leader can always maintain characteristics of a servant leader even when applying other styles of leadership prescribed by contingency theory. The paper builds upon Staats (2015) by defining how servant leadership interacts within contingency theory as well as introducing model that is centered around follower maturity as the mediating factor of leadership style selection. The theoretical model proposed allows a leader to apply servant leader attributes blended with transactional and transformational leadership in an environment of diverse followers. This serves as a pragmatic model for responsible, compassionate, and effective leadership.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Contingency Theory, Situational Leadership

The leadership dilemma today is more complex than ever. There are multiple generations currently in the workforce spanning millennials to baby boomers. This spectrum leads to a complex environment where multiple styles of leadership are necessary in order for a leader to be successful. Followers that are baby boomers will not respond to a leader in the same manner as a millennial will. Due to the considerable differences that exist among groups of followers, a dynamic and adaptable leader is necessary in the modern workplace.

Staats addressed a similar concept in 2015 that set the conditions for this concept to be expanded and to be analyzed further. Staats' model emphasizes the need to be an adaptive leader in varying environments, but fails to define the mediating factors that dictate the adaptions for the leader. Staats' model suggests transactional and transformational leadership may serve as a conduit to servant leadership, thus allowing the follower to be led through a style of leadership that is initially more effective. However, the model presented by Staats appears to be oriented on the leader's choice of leadership style or driven by the needs of the organization to select the style of leadership used—that a leader's emphasis on management over leadership or on objectives or people is what dictates style of leadership. He does not clearly define what bridges transactional and transformational leadership to servant leadership, other than leader or organizational personality and their objectives. This is largely in line with traditional views of contingency theory. It is also unclear how or if transactional and transformational leadership differ when being applied by a servant leader as opposed to a non-servant leader.

While we do not discount the benefit of Staats' model to accommodate organizational objectives, we believe achieving organizational objectives is merely a means to better serve the follower and encourage him to also become a servant leader. As such, our model is designed assuming the leader is a servant leader and his desired outcome is to lead using servant leadership in its entirety; however, may be limited in his approach by other external variables. The primary variable we have identified as our mediating factor of leadership selection is the level of professional maturity of the follower. Our model is oriented on the follower to drive the leadership style employed by the leader until a follower is further developed and is able to fully benefit from servant leadership in its entirety.

Our model also defines what transaction and transformational leadership might look like when applied by a servant leader as a transitionary leadership style progressing towards servant leadership.

The dynamic leader discussed would utilize established best practices when selecting leadership style or technique; however; a truly dynamic leader who is committed to excellence and success can be a servant leader regardless of the specific leadership techniques he or she uses. The two styles of leadership that are discussed are transactional leadership and transformational leadership, suggesting a leader will use hybrid transactional or transformational servant leadership to best achieve the needs of followers.

Conceptual Framework

The servant leader has the ability to employ multiple leadership styles while maintaining the core values of a servant leader. The foundation of great leadership is ultimately the responsibility of the leader, which is why we do not call "leadership" by a different term such as "followership." This leader can always be emulated regardless of the leadership style that is being used. The attributes and competencies identified by Collins (2001), Spears (2010), van Dierendonck (2011), all have significant overlap when describing key leader attributes and are embodied by servant leadership. The leader who possesses these attributes and competencies is rare, but can be a dynamic leader set up for success through use of multiple leadership styles.

The fundamental issue outlined is a question of character. The underlying assumption of character is a demonstration of maturity and wisdom of the leader. It is impossible to have a true appreciation for the art and science of leadership, without placing the foundational focus on the person doing the leading. The image of the leader tells you much about the organization. They are the organizational guide who provides vision and sets the example.

The dynamic servant leader can use transactional and transformational leadership styles while still embodying core servant leader principles. The servant leader, at times, has to apply "tough love" to a follower in order to reach the desired outcome that benefits the follower. Ultimately, the servant leader has to take necessary actions for the benefit of the followers in order for them to be successful through authenticity and care from their leader.

Follower Maturity

Discussions of leadership frequently orient on the leader and often discount the role of the led — the follower. The follower cannot be discredited in regards to his or her influence on the effectiveness of servant leadership or any other style of leadership. Follower personalities differ, maturity levels are not always the same, and experience varies from individual to individual; all of which demonstrate why followers cannot be simplified into a singular homogenous variable. The Hersey-Blanchard model of situational leadership amplifies the importance of changing leadership styles varying upon the person(s) being led, suggesting follower maturity is the key variable in selecting an appropriate style of leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1972). Early versions of Heresy and Blanchard's situational leadership model use follower maturity as the mediating variable to determine leadership style; however, in later models "maturity" was changed to "development" and modifications were made to the definitions of each level of maturity or development. For our utilization of follower maturity, we apply elements of both the updated (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Nelson, 1993) and classic (Hersey & Blanchard, 1972) situational theory model to form our definitions and understanding of the follower.

We define follower maturity as an individual's professional maturity that is influenced by his or her personal competence, desire to take responsibility, and commitment to their organization, in addition to their level of professional development. Based off our application of this model to followership within the workforce, we believe certain aspects of the original Hersey-Blanchard model, namely M1 maturity over D1 Development, more closely align to the currently observed population within the workforce. Undoubtedly, a new worker who joins the entry level job market exhibits some level of commitment, as described by Blanchard et al. (1993) as a D1 attribute; however, the demands of specific responsibilities within their duties and job scope may not be tasks that an individual truly desires to accomplish, despite having shown the commitment to initially come to work. Instead, this more closely aligns with the original M1 description by Hersey and Blanchard, which designated a follower as unable and unwilling. Thus we describe our M1 maturity level as an individual who possesses low competence (lacks knowledge and skills) and low commitment (or willingness to perform).

For M2 and M3 levels, we acknowledge the contributions of Blanchard et al. (1993) and incorporate their definition of development (D2 and D3) into ours; however, we retain the title of maturity (M2 and M3) in lieu of development. As such, we define M2 as an individual who possesses some (moderate) competence, but continues to have low commitment. M3 maturity is defined as having high competence and moderate (or variable) commitment. Variable commitment is best described as a result of the follower being unsure, uneasy, or adjusting to the acceptance of increased responsibility. M4 maturity is defined as followers being trained, willing, and experienced (possessing high competence and commitment) and having the confidence to complete tasks on their own.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership was formalized by J.M. Burns (1978) who asserted that leaders motivate followers by the exchange of resources to gratify low-order follower needs; also suggesting transactional leadership is the most common approach to managing subordinates. Transactional leadership is based on a leader's bureaucratic or positional authority over followers, and focuses on task completion through the use of closely monitored supervision (Tracey & Hinkin, 1998). Transactional leadership relies heavily on the use of rewards and punishments to gain follower compliance; the primary characteristics are contingent reward, management by exception—active, management by exception—passive (Bass, 1985).

Transactional leadership is most effective when an organization is composed of unskilled or unmotivated employees and is attempting to maintain the status quo through clearly defined rules and goals. A transactional manager will provide knowledge of task and time of completion to his followers and primarily provide extrinsic motivators to facilitate task completion. This style of leadership is more of a hands-on management style of leadership. An effective transactional leader is able to reward followers in a timely manner when a task is completed correctly. This style of leadership is closely aligned with

the "Telling" quadrant of the Hersey-Blanchard situational leadership model, suggesting this leadership style is more directive in nature. Transactional leadership applied to Blanchard's model is in the quadrant S1 or the telling quadrant. The application of transactional leadership to the fiduciary duty of a manager is that this individual will be an effective manager, but believing the followers have low competence. This manager will also be more of a micro-manager (de Oliveira Rodrigues & Ferreira 2015).

Transactional leaders are found throughout all levels of military leadership from junior non-commissioned officers to senior ranking officers. This is a hands-on style of direct leadership requiring systematic supervision of low maturity followers. This style of leadership requires a certain degree of mutual trust between follower and leader to correctly implement in order to prevent micro-management or perceived micro-management. Transactional leadership is the preferred method of the high-turnover or initial-entry worker leadership when follower maturity is low and task or mission accomplishment is a high priority.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership originated with J.M. Burns (1978) who postulated transformational leaders appeal to the high order motivations (Maslow, 1954) of followers, in comparison to transactional leader who focus on meeting a follower's low-order needs. Transformational leadership was further developed by Bass and Avolio (Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 1990a), who suggested leaders should place greater emphasis on follower development in order to improve follower performance, which in turn supports organizational goals and vision. Avolio, Waldman, and Yammarino (1991) established four primary principles that comprise transformational leadership; idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

The greatest difficulty faced by most leaders is finding the precise balance between accomplishing organizational goals and concern for the well-being and development of organizational members. Transformational leadership helps alleviate conflict between these two elements because organizational goals are met through follower development. The study conducted by Kane & Tremble (2000) supports the notion that transformational leadership is better received by more mature followers. As follower maturity increases, the more receptive they are to transformational leadership. The example given in the study ranges from platoon leaders to platoon members, company commanders to platoon leaders, battalion commanders to company commanders. This representation shows that as followers progress in rank and position the more effective transformational leadership is (Kane & Tremble 2000).

> Transformational leadership promotes the following subordinate outcomes: admiration, respect, and trust of the leader; motivation and commitment to shared goals and visions; innovative and creative approaches and growth reflecting the unique needs and desires of individual followers (Kane & Tremble, 2000; 4).

When followers have the high desire to accomplish tasks and the high desire for relationship they will respond best to transformational leadership. This style of leadership will be applied when the maturity level is generally higher. The findings from Kane & Tremble (2000) analyze the impacts of transactional and transformational leadership on the army formations at different levels. Their findings showed that platoon members, platoon leaders, and company commanders all had different reactions to the two types of leadership.

Situational Leadership

The Hersey-Blanchard situational leadership model states that there is no single best style of leadership. The most effective leaders are those who demonstrate the ability to adapt to a specific situation. Hersey and Blanchard's situational theory focuses on follower maturity as the primary component of determining a method of leadership. The Hersey-Blanchard situational leadership model applies four leadership styles: telling (directing), selling (coaching), participating (supporting), and delegating. The telling style reflects high consideration for task and low consideration for relationships. The selling style is concerned with both relationships and tasks. The participating style is more oriented on relationship building and less with task behavior. The delegating style expresses low concern for tasks and relationships (Daft, 2005).

The Blanchard situational theory is tailored to the competency and commitment levels of subordinates. The type of followers dictates which leadership style a leader will employ. The model is based on three factors consisting of task behavior, relationship behavior, and readiness level. Task behavior consists of the extent to which the leader engages in specifying the duties and responsibilities of an individual or a group. Relationship behavior consists of the degree to which the leader engages in two-way or multiway communication, as well as focusing on areas that may not directly correlate to task accomplishment. Readiness level references how followers demonstrate the ability and willingness to accomplish a specific task.

The followers who have low-level consideration for relationship and high task orientation fall into S1 or the Telling quadrant. Followers who are driven to accomplish tasks and have little care for interaction with their supervisor or leader fit well in the transactional leadership style. The two dimensions of transactional leadership are contingent reward and management by exception (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1990). Transactional leadership is effective at accomplishing a task and is effective in certain situations where employees have low competence or maturity.

The Ohio State and Michigan studies made an effort to identify behaviors of effective leaders through questionnaires. Transactional leadership was shown to be an effective style of leadership, but with the application of the Ohio State and Michigan studies, transactional leadership only ties to job-centered/initiating structure oriented organizations. Transactional leadership may be less effective with more mature or developed followers.

Followers who have high consideration for both task and relationship fall into S2 or the Selling quadrant. This quadrant shows followers with a high task orientation and a high relationship orientation that align with the concepts of transformational leadership.

The situational leadership theory that supports the idea of follower maturity influences the form of leadership being used with the followers. As the leaders of the respective organizations deal with more mature subordinate leaders, the effect of transformational leadership continues to increase. The more mature a follower is the more effective transformational leadership will be when those individuals have high task orientation as well.

The followers who have high consideration for both task and relationship fall into S3 or the participating quadrant. Followers with these characteristics will respond best when their leader exemplifies servant leadership.

Servant Leader Attributes

Servant leadership was conceived by Robert Greenleaf (1977) to combat the "leadership crisis" that he perceived to be occurring in modern society. Greenleaf states leaders must meet the needs of those they lead and that a leader's primarily motivation should be a desire to serve and not one of self-interest (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf (1977) proposed the best test of servant leadership is to ask, "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants?" Since its initial inception, servant leadership has lacked a clear definition or definitive attributes and subsequent servant leadership literature has produced numerous interpretations and attributes to describe servant leadership.

Larry Spears (2010) recognized 10 major attributes that he determined to best embody Greenleaf's writings as: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Building upon Spears' work to outline the characteristics of servant leadership, Russell and Stone (2002) conducted a comprehensive review of servant leadership literature and found 9 functional attributes of servant leaders: vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment; in addition to 11 other accompanying attributes. Dirk van Dierendonk's (2011) meta-analysis of servant leader literature and associated servant leader models found 44 attributes exist and he distilled these attributes into 6 distinct key characteristics: empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship. Van Dierendonk (2011) also concluded an individual doesn't have to be motivated to serve first, a requisite of Greenleaf (1977), but can first be motivated to lead and can then later incorporate the serving attitude that is central to servant leadership. The above characteristics or attributes frame the ideal servant leader regardless of the style of leadership being applied with the follower. These characteristics are

something anyone can maintain throughout one's career progression as they increase in maturity and gradually begin to lead higher-level maturity followers.

The characteristics and attributes defined above are embedded in the servant leader, regardless of what style the leader is leading with, and are constantly at the forefront of the leader's mind. A servant leader is who he is, based on the principles that define him, not based on the style of leadership he uses. This allows a servant leader to transition between different styles of leadership to maximize leader effectiveness based on the development and maturity level of followers under the servant leader. Thus we propose the following:

Proposition 1: Based on follower maturity, a leader can incorporate attributes of a servant leader while applying transactional or transformational leadership.
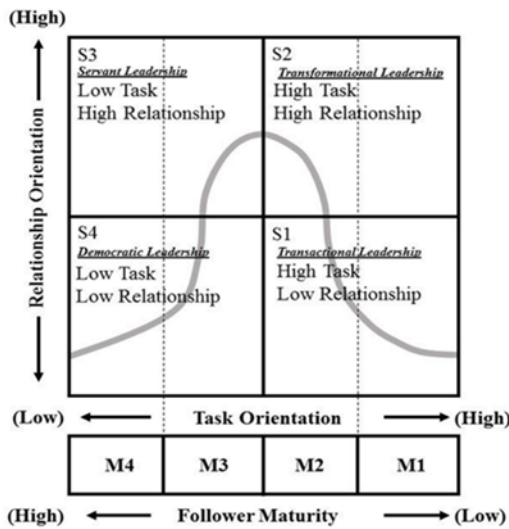
If a servant leader is applying transactional leadership with the group of followers that are being led, the servant leader still has the ability to apply servant leader-like characteristics and attributes with those being led through transactional leadership. A leader serving their followers can still provide things like foresight, conceptualization, empowerment, and care for the growth of their people even through the medium of either transactional or transformational leadership.

Servant leaders can use transactional styles, but still remain servant leaders as long as their use of transactional leadership serves to develop the followers. The proposed transactional servant leadership style could help them grow in their personal and professional maturity, which will in turn allow the servant leader to introduce additional attributes of servant leadership as the follower matures.

The follower maturity is going to drive the selection of transactional or transformational leadership style. The transactional leadership style is typically associated with M1 followers who possess low commitment and low competence. The transformational leadership style equates to about the level of M2, medium competence, low commitment. The realm of servant leadership generally encompasses the M3 and M4 dynamics. M3 consists of high competence and medium commitment, and M4 consists of high competence and high commitment.

The servant leader's proficiency and ability to identify the level of maturity of the follower is essential to maximize leadership effectiveness. The servant leader can distinguish between M1 through M4 of the followers and apply the leadership style that best fits the follower. See Figure 1.

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Figure 1

Transactional Servant Leadership

Proposition 2: Transactional servant leadership is the art of applying rewards and punishments with the intent to further develop followers while still achieving organizational goals required of the leader.

This managerial style of leadership is segmented and is most effective with the follower that matches a maturity consisting of M1, low competence, low commitment.

Within the U.S. army, the model of transactional servant leadership yielding high effectiveness is personified through the actions of most of the Army's junior non-commissioned officer corps. This level leader typically manages three to five soldiers who almost always fall in the category of M1. The style of leadership performed at this level is highly transactional and involves an immense amount of leader supervision. The junior non-commissioned officer generally will be there executing the task with the soldiers or will be back frequently to check on the soldier during the accomplishment of the task. The junior non-commissioned officer will tell the subordinates to complete a very specific task making sure they are given conditions and standards to complete the task. The junior non-commissioned officer will allow them to execute the task and have them report when finished. It is common practice for this level leader to directly supervise the task.

They use these techniques to further develop soldiers, once a solider demonstrates he can complete simple tasks under direct supervision, displaying that he has grown as a professional, more complex tasks can be assigned and more autonomy can be granted.
The resulting job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior is described by Asnecio & Mujkic (2016):

Consistently reward their employees for their performance and take corrective actions when problems arise both high and low performing employees will feel confident that their leaders will continue to consistently reward improved performance and punish underperformance. The empirical evidence supports these claims as several researchers find that leaders who exhibit transactional leadership behaviors when managing organizations are likely to be more trusted among followers (Asnecio & Mukjic, 2016, p. 160).

The outcome is likely driven by empowering subordinates to operate by giving the criteria of the task and timeline for it to be completed. When active transactional leadership is being practiced by management the relationship between contingent reward and management by exception with organizational citizenship behaviors has a strong positive relationship (de Oliveira Rodrigues & Ferreira 2015). Transactional leaders rely heavily on exchanges with followers and have a strong sense of initiating structure present in this leadership style.

An example of the transactional servant leader in the U.S. army is the E-5 team leader who is in charge of three to five soldiers and is dedicated to the growth of subordinates. Through the awareness, knowledge, trust, and vision the leader provides, the leader can help foster the success of the followers. The soldiers fall under the M1 classification and must be slowly taught how to conduct themselves. The transactional servant leader allows them to achieve self-discovery and progress on the maturity scale through mentorship and shared endured hardships.

Transactional servant leaders can provide servant leader attributes while employing transactional leadership: empower, provide foresight, trust, vision, integrity, be committed to the followers' growth, and have awareness, etc. (van Dierendonck 2011; Spears, 2010) The transactional servant leader will have enough awareness to implement the best plan to cultivate the growth of the followers. Transactional servant leadership is a method to help increase the maturity of the follower to continue their progression to being effectively led to transformational servant leadership and ultimately to ensure the follower is developed to M4 if possible.

Transformational Servant Leadership

Proposition 3: Transformational servant leadership is an authentic style of leadership that is committed to the growth of people through collaboration and accomplishment of the organization's goals.

This inclusive style of leadership generally gravitates to those with higher maturity levels. This style of leadership is generally more successful and effective at the M2, high competence, and low commitment, level and above. The collaboration and team-like feel of this leadership style can be a symbiotic relationship for the organization and the people.

Transformational servant leadership generally occurs at an organizational size of about 50 or more people and relies heavily upon leader and follower collaboration to accomplish a given mission. The authentic and supportive leadership that is provided by the organization's leader allows the subordinate leaders to garner trust in their leadership. The organization's leader will provide direction and guidance when necessary to ensure the safety of the organization's employees and the accomplishment of the organization's mission, while empowering subordinates. The ultimate goal of the leader is the growth and betterment of his or her followers, while ensuring the organization does not fail. A method of transformational servant leadership is often witnessed when a program manager, through use of foresight, provides boundaries for subordinate leaders (project managers) to operate in order to accomplish the organization's goal or mission; by understanding the program manager's intent and through mutual trust, subordinate leaders have significant autonomy and freedom to accomplish their mission. This style of leadership applies well to teams of up to twenty personnel, often thought to be M2, high competence, low commitment, allows the program manager to develop the subordinate leaders to become better leaders and ultimately serves their employees to the best of their ability as they progress through their career. Russell & Stone (2002) stated that:

> Both transformational leadership and Servant Leadership emphasize the importance of appreciating and valuing people, listening, mentoring or teaching, and empowering followers. In fact, the theories are probably most similar in their emphasis upon individualized consideration and appreciation of followers (Russell & Stone, 2002, p. 354).

Nevertheless, transformational leadership and servant leadership do have points of divergence. There is a much greater emphasis upon service to followers in the servant leadership paradigm. Furthermore, while both transformational leaders and servant leaders are influential, servant leaders gain influence in a nontraditional manner that derives from servanthood itself (Russell & Stone, 2002). In so doing, they allow extraordinary freedom for followers to exercise their own abilities. They also place a much higher degree of trust in their followers than would be the case in any leadership style that required the leader to be somewhat directive (Russel & Stone 2002)."

Nevertheless, the amount of overlap that is found between transformational leadership and servant leadership is immense. The theory of transformational servant leadership is supported in that the dynamic leader will know when to combine the transformational leadership technique with the servant leadership principles.

Russell and Stone (2002) conclude the primary difference between transformational leadership and servant leadership is based on leader focus; a transformational leader's focus is directed towards the organization; whereas, a servant leader focuses on his or her followers instead. We acknowledge this distinction; however, when orienting on a M2 maturity follower who possesses low commitment, we recognize the need for certain

transformational attributes in order to ensure organizational success occurs in additional to follower growth and development.

The transformational servant leader ultimately has a genuine desire to grow and develop followers; he recognizes the follower's motivation has advanced beyond simple rewards and punishments and the follower possesses the capability for further professional and personal growth. The transformational servant leader also acknowledges his role as a steward of the organization to ensure that the organization does not fail, while still facilitating follower growth and development. Given the low commitment of an M2 follower, the transformational servant leader must exercise his fiduciary duty and ensure organizational goals are met until his or her followers have grown in their maturity and commitment to the organization. This style of leadership allows the progression and development of a M2 follower to achieve a higher level of maturity, who will then be more receptive and willing to become themselves, a servant leader.

Summary

Servant leadership embodies a set of core principles that exemplify who the leader is. These principles have been clearly defined by previous contemporary servant leader authors. The servant leader can employ transactional or transformational leadership based on the style of leadership required to best serve his follower as determined by follower maturity. The followers at the M1 maturity level are best served by a transactional servant leadership approach that allows for the follower to still be developed by a servant leader while being closely managed in a controlled setting.

Transformational servant leadership allows for the continued growth, development, and autonomy of the follower while still providing a safeguard to accomplish organizational goals, but ensuring the leader does not lose sight of the follower's significance. The transformational servant leader's ultimate goal is to develop a follower into a future servant leader who has the ability to lead and serve dynamically. This newly developed leader will strive to develop the individuals of the organization, in addition to improving and developing the organization to which he or she belongs.

Further Research

Further research should focus on data collection among leaders and followers to provide empirical evidence to further support the proposed theory. Additional studies could be performed in organizations where transactional leadership and transformational leadership are the currently applied leadership styles to determine if the proposed theory has validity. Further research would also need to examine self-proclaimed servant led organizations to see if distinct transactional or transformational leadership attributes are being utilized by leaders, yet are not separately identified as transactional servant leadership or transformational servant leadership.

CONCLUSION

Transactional servant leadership and transformational servant leadership are both plausible styles of leadership that encompass the best attributes of a servant leader applying the correct leadership style based on follower maturity in order to best serve the follower and the organization. Situational leadership exemplifies how a leader can be more effective if that leader tailors his or her leadership style to the level of follower development and maturity. The situational servant leader can and will adjust to meet the requirements of the follower in order to best accomplish the organization's goals, regardless of which leadership style is being used. The situational servant leader takes the principles and attributes of servant leadership with them into the situation where leadership needs to be applied. This may provide the organization and the followers with the best possible relationship between the leader, the organization, and the follower.

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