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Exploring Antecedents of Those

Who Practice Servant Leadership

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF LEADERSHIP ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

by

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May 10, 2019

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore the preceding essence of the individual who is a servant leader. In search of antecedents, the researcher used a qualitative method with a phenomenological design, exploring what brought the participants to utilize servant leadership. Furthermore, the researcher aimed to fill a gap by asking participants to provide their stories of what brought them to employ such a leadership style versus suggesting answers. This qualitative research study was conducted to answer the question: "What are the antecedents of the person who practices servant leadership?" A criterion sample was used to recruit servant leaders through the social media network LinkedIn.com. Three subjects participated in the study and were found to have common antecedents featuring religion and military service combined with personal and educational influences, as well as characteristics such as integrity, compassion, supportive, and responsible. Other commonalities of the participants included planning and training experience, as well as reading, exercise and sleep for self-care.

Keywords: servant leadership, antecedents, religion, military, integrity, qualitative, phenomenology

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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of Problem

Servant leadership (SL) is so complex it must be lived and learned; it cannot all be taught (Focht & Ponton, 2015). Every challenge of leading and serving may not be found in any book. The renowned leadership book, *The Leader's Companion: Insights on Leadership Through the Ages* opens with a statement regarding the need for undeniable leadership. The author suggests Greenleaf's concept of SL may be a solution to the predicament (Wren, 1995). SL is an under-developed theory coined by Greenleaf (1977) who proposed servant leaders take care of "the other people's highest priority needs [first]" (p. 27). Greenleaf believed "that the great leader is seen as a servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness" (p. 21). Due to the lack of a development in the theory there are many calls for empirical research regarding the SL phenomenon (Barbuto, Gottfredson, & Searle, 2014; Beck, 2014; Greenleaf, 1977).

Some components of SL which have been explored include, but are not limited to, the impact on follower engagement and well-being, the impact on future leadership, the cause-related effects of SL, as well as studies on the behaviors of leaders (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Jit, Sharma, & Kawatra, 2017; Lacroix & Pircher Verdorfer, 2017; Parris & Peachey, 2013b; Winston & Fields, 2015). Yet, even though there are still calls for comprehensive theory development (Berger, 2014), the antecedents or background of SL have been suggested as future areas of research as well (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Nonetheless, only been a few studies have been conducted regarding the antecedent essence of SL (i.e., Amah, 2018; Barbuto et al., 2014; Beck, 2014).

Primarily, the related studies of SL have been directed toward the impacts on followers' behaviors (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Jit et al., 2017; Lacroix & Pircher Verdorfer, 2017). Although this is important, the literature which has more relevance to the study is specific to discovering the antecedents of SL. The next chapter will review the literature of servant leaders' common experiences and exploration of the antecedents of SL (Barbuto et al., 2014; Boone & Makhani, 2013; Sendjaya, 2015; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Thumma & Beene, 2015; Winston & Fields, 2015). The studies conducted on the antecedents of SL are scant, yet, some exist.

Significance of Study

Although Greenleaf (1977) coined SL, the style of leading was introduced far before the 1970's. "Christianity's founder, Jesus Christ, …first taught the concept of servant leadership … and applied it in concrete ways" (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). The altruistic mindset is how SL originates, and then the ambition to lead develops (Barbuto et al., 2014; Greenleaf, 1977; Mallén, Chiva, Alegre, & Guinot, 2015). Graham (1991) predicted that certain "characteristics such as low need for power, genuine humility, and high empathy are likely antecedents of servant-leadership" (Winston & Fields, 2015, p. 416). Yet, there is a lack of empirical or phenomenological research to support any predictions about the backgrounds of servant leaders.

This research to be conducted represents one of few which focuses on the experienced consistencies of those who practice SL. The results could provide leadership recruitment agencies with empirical evidence of characteristics of servant leaders. Additionally, it may provide servant leaders with documented reflection of their leadership experiences. Furthermore, it may provide answers about the leader who uses

SL principles in their work (Barbuto et al., 2014; Beck, 2014; Graham, 1991). The researchers who have called for exploration into the antecedents of SL might also be interested in the results of this study (Beck, 2014; Winston & Fields, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the antecedents of those who support and/or employ SL within their work and/or personal lives. By conducting interviews, using questionnaires, and collecting participant CVs, the researcher aimed to provide a comprehensive view of the preceding essence of the individual who is a servant leader. The participants were identified based on their proclamation of being a servant leader. SL is generally defined as a style of leadership or lifestyle with pronounced altruistic inclinations. Greenleaf (1977) emphasized "the net effect of one's influence on others enriches, [as opposed to being] neutral, diminish[ing] or deplet[ing]" (p. 56).

Research Questions

A central question will guide this study: What are the antecedents of those who practice SL? Other questions that will be addressed in this study include:

A.   How did participants result in employing SL with their followers?

B.   What are the common antecedents of the servant leader?

C.   What do servant leaders do for work or for self-care?

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Despite the lack of a universal definition and theory for SL (Anderson, 2009; Berger, 2014), this exploration was conducted with assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The assumptions of the researcher were: (a) participants practice SL; (b)

the sample is assumed to represent the SL population, and; (c) the participants were assumed to answer honestly. Further, the assumption of *the qualitative researcher* was that developing an understanding of the phenomena, SL, begins with "describe[ing] the lived experiences of individuals … as described by the participants…" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13) and the assumptions of *the phenomenological researcher* include that there are common lived experiences before SL was utilized by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The limitations to this qualitative study were: (a) the quality of the research was dependent on and influenced by the researcher; (b) objectivity would be difficult due to the design of the study and because of the personal use of the leadership style; (c) synthesizing the data from the interviews with servant leaders would be time consuming; (d) this is the first phenomenological study of the antecedents of those using SL; and (e) the volume of findings may be "difficult and time consuming to characterize in a visual way" (Anderson, 2010, p. 3).

The delimitations of this study are: (a) the participant must be a leader who has studied and practiced or declared SL as a style of leadership they employ; (b) the participant must complete the pre-interview questionnaire submit at least a CV in the supportive documentation; (c) the participant must partake in an interview to answer the interview questions and (d) the participant must complete the follow up questionnaire (see Appendix A, B, & C).

Chapter II: Literature Review

What is Servant Leadership?

SL is sometimes initially perceived as a contradictory form of leading, in which the leader sets aside their desires, while serving the desires of their followers (Sendjaya, 2015). Winston and Fields (2015) describe the essence of SL as "the leader exhibiting a key set of behaviors focused on the welfare and progress of followers" (p. 417). Reaffirming this impression, Sendjaya (2015) suggests servant leaders ought to be thinking "…'I am the leader, therefore I serve' rather than 'I am the leader, therefore I lead'" (p. 43). Servant leaders exhibit behaviors that are similar to humble leaders as described by Morris, Brotheridge, and Urbanski (2005, p. 1325), "…behav[ing] in a manner that is primarily other-enhancing, rather than self-enhancing." SL is either a choice (Olsby, 2011) or natural inclination, like that of Jesus Christ (Amah, 2018), in which the leader feels prosperous when the group member's needs are met first.

While there are many descriptions of the servant leader, even Greenleaf (1977) only described SL loosely, not leaving behind a concrete definition. Along the same lines, Berger (2014) argues SL is an approach to leadership which has "…many different conceptual models and related measurement instruments… [but does not yet have an] …agreed upon definition" (p. 146). Nevertheless, SL has been the prescribed approach to dilemmas in numerous fundamental settings; professionals in education (Bugenhagen, 2006), large corporations (Franklin, 2010), and academic scholars (Barbuto et al., 2014) value SL.

Who is the servant leader? The qualities of the leader who takes initiative, has foresight, is humble, understanding, accepting, and moral, as well as serving and

enriching the lives of others, is that of the servant leader (Greenleaf, 1977). Taking

initiative, the way Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, when no one else was there to

do it (Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010) is a trait of the servant leader. Initiative goes hand in

hand with having wisdom and foresight, knowing when and how to react (Barbuto &

Wheeler, 2006). Another skill of the servant leaders is listening. As described by

Sendjaya (2015), listening is an "act of service [and] discipline of responding to any

problem by listening first" (p. 45)… to the followers. Active listening is how the servant

leader understands and accepts the followers highest needs (Focht & Ponton, 2015). The

servant leader is exercising moral influence on their followers through example and

expectation (Du Plessis, Wakelin, & Nel, 2015). Consequently, by employing the

abovementioned attributes, the leader provides service and enrichment to the lives of

those who are led. Teaching through example, working beside and not above, and

listening to understand builds trust between leader and follower, creating options for

growth and prosperity, which is the essence of SL (Winston & Fields, 2015). Greenleaf

(1977) established "the best test [for identifying the servant leader], and difficult to

administer, is this: Do those served grow as [people]?" (p. 27). While this is imprecise,

for the purposes of this study those who chose to use, support or reference SL as a

preferred style of leading sufficed.

> *How a person becomes a servant leader*. By extension, what is unclear is whether

a leader can choose to serve and therefore become a servant leader. It is vague because of

the emphasis on the servant making the choice to aspire to lead (Amah, 2018; Beck,

2014; Focht & Ponton, 2015; Greenleaf, 1977). One researcher, Bugenhagen (2006),

acknowledges this glitch in the identity of servant leaders, answering that leadership

styles are "employed by leaders… [and] the leader's desire to serve others and encourage followers" (p. 22) confirms that the ordinary leader can transition into SL by choice. As an illustration, Parris and Peachey's (2013b) study displayed how a cause-related sporting event would inspire SL in participants, finding "the event had a pronounced positive impact on the participants' desire to serve others" (p. 495). The point here is not just that people can be influenced to serve, but that the participants, whom can be considered community leaders, were influenced to serve and potentially enrich the lives of others. Ultimately, indicating that the leader can chose to serve (Parris & Peachey, 2013b).

Along the same lines as the timeless riddle of the egg and the chicken, which came first? The leader choosing to become a servant or the servant aspiring to be a leader are equally valid for the purposes of the study. Regardless of the choice, there is still much validation in the attributes described by Greenleaf to help supporters utilize SL.

Calls for research

Even though SL emerged decades ago, there is still much to be explored and examined. Winston and Fields (2015) asserted "clearly future studies should examine servant leadership longitudinally" (p. 429). Similarly, Berger (2014, p. 161) challenges the SL research community to focus on "developing [a] strong theory". Numerous scholars have called for the investigation of the backgrounds of the servant leader (Parris & Peachey, 2013a). Consider Graham (1991) whom called for the exploration of the antecedents of SL speculating that "low need for power, genuine humility, high empathy and communication skills" (p. 117) are probable traits of the servant leader. In addition Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) proposed variables such as emotional intelligence, flexibility, openness to experience, early childhood experiences, and exposure to servant

leaders as possible antecedents to leadership style choice. These calls for research in the field of SL have been answered by some, and the next section discusses the studies that have been conducted in search of the essence of the leader before SL was employed.

Review of Current Studies

The academic developments on the antecedents of leaders who use SL are scant, but emerging. The research performed validates and calls for even more inquiry of the topic. Some of the researchers investigated with specific agendas (e.g., Amah, 2018; Beck, 2014; Du Plessis et al., 2015; Hunter et al., 2013) and others sought only to review or establish the theory without any empirical evidence (e.g., Parris & Peachey, 2013a; Van Dierendonck, 2011). All the literature pertaining to the antecedents of practicing SL was considered worthwhile to the review of literature, however in terms of scaffolding the design of the research, preference was given to the studies with the empirical evidence.

Theory. Most researchers attest that there is still uncertainty in the structure of SL (Beck, 2014; Hunter et al., 2013; Sun, 2013). Anderson (2009) highlights this by scrutinizing the concept of SL, ultimately claiming there is not enough empirical evidence for the model to be validated. While this is true, an eagerness to move beyond the theory and into other areas of interest also exist. Accordingly, Sousa (2017) inquired about the effect of the SL interaction of humility, action, and hierarchical power on follower engagement. In fact, Morris (2005) proposed that "leaders with high levels of humility are more likely to be servant leaders" (p. 1339), despite the lack of grounded theory. Hunter et al. (2013) suggested that servant leaders themselves are the antecedents to SL, "expand[ing] the notion that servant leaders are effective by inspiring a cycle of

service in which followers learn to serve" (p. 327); thus, creating potentially more servant

leaders. Hunter et al.'s "investigation of personality lend[ed] insight into the types of

individuals who are likely to become servant leaders" (p.327), but still did not offer

empirical evidence.

Experiments. Du Plessis et al. (2015), conducted a quantitative study in which

the participants were from "two separate private sector organizations in the media and

pharmaceutical industries within the South African context" (p. 4) who were given

questionnaires in order to survey for the influence of emotional intelligence and trust on

SL. The researchers concluded that "only when the dimensions of service, trust and

emotional intelligence are aligned and fully integrated within the leader does such a

leader ascend to meaningfulness" (Du Plessis et al., 2015, p. 7). This presumes time is an

attribute of SL because it takes time to build trust and give service.

Experiences. Beck (2014) agreed with Du Plessis et al., determining time as an

antecedent of SL. Beck conducted a mixed-methods study inquiring if there were

"characteristics, behaviors, or life experiences that would predict a servant leader" which

resulted in four key findings about the antecedents of SL. Beck's study concluded:

(a) the longer a leader is in a leadership role, the more frequent the servant leader

behaviors; (b) leaders who volunteer at least 1 hour per week demonstrate higher

servant leader behaviors; (c) servant leaders influence others through building

trusting relationships; and (d) servant leaders demonstrate an altruistic mindset.

(p. 299)

Similarly, Bugenhagen (2006) surveyed and interviewed participants in search of

the antecedents to transactional, transformational, and SL through a constructive-

development approach. While the researcher's findings did not correspond with their

hypotheses, they did discover leaders' wisdom "had a positive connection with the

leader's level of meaning-making" (p. 165). Thus, while these studies offer introduction

to what the backgrounds of the servant leader may be, they are not comprehensive or

objective; and the researchers seem to seek a specific answer.

   Traits as antecedents. Many scholars (e.g., Berger, 2014; Franklin, 2010; Hunter

et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2005; Sun, 2013) have cited the trait of humility as an essential

quality of the servant leader. Morris et al.'s (2005) admits that "humility is expected to

result in leadership behaviors that parallel those of servant leaders" (p. 1339). Therefore,

the antecedents of the humble leader are assumed parallel to those of the servant leader

and can be considered in this literature review. The article speculated:

…individuals whose personal traits include narcissism, Machiavellianism, low

self-esteem, or defensively high self-esteem are likely to have low levels of self-

awareness, openness, and transcendence, which are the dimensions of humility;

and that the latter characteristics are more likely to be found in individuals with

high levels of emotional awareness and control, components of emotional

intelligence.

   Humility, in turn, is expected to generate servant leader-type behaviors

such as engaging in supportive relationships, presenting a socialized power

motivation, and leading through participation. (J. A. Morris et al., 2005, p. 1343)

Therefore, just as being humble is an attribute of SL it may be one of the antecedents.

Even though Morris et al.'s exploration of humility claimed to focus on leadership

behaviors *and* "underlying psychological mechanisms associated with such human

virtues as humility" (p.1325), it can still be considered a study relevant to this literature review.

Other character traits have also been insinuated as antecedents of SL. For example, Barbuto et al.'s (2014) research found "emotional intelligence is a good predictor of a leader's servant-leader ideology (or approach toward leadership) but may not be a good predictor of servant-leader behaviors as rated by the leaders' followers" (p. 315). Additionally, Amah (2018) surveyed participants from the "oil, financial, manufacturing, power, service and telecommunication industries" and considered three variables in determining the antecedents: the motivation to serve, the motivation to lead, and self-efficacy. Amah (2018) found that "self-efficacy is a critical variable because of its effect on SL…[and] motivation to serve is an antecedent" (pt. Abstract). Interestingly, character traits of the servant leader seem to be pronounced in the search of the background of why SL is used (Amah, 2018; Beck, 2014; Du Plessis et al., 2015; J. A. Morris et al., 2005). For example, the servant leader is described as humble, but the humility could perhaps be one of the antecedents to, choosing to be or being identified as, a servant leader.

While there have been many suggestions as to where to begin the search for the antecedents of SL style, there is little mention of a need for qualitative study. Specifically, an open-ended research study is needed, which collects and compares the commonalities of what servant leaders declare were the antecedents of practicing SL. Most of the research conducted on SL's antecedents interject certain attributes, experiences, skills, or characteristics as the suggested answers.

Next, the review of the literature exposes some deficiencies in the research conducted thus far on the antecedents of SL.

Deficiencies in the Literature

Beck (2014) attempted to find the answers to the phenomenon of SL and its antecedents, but the sample of leaders were limited to the rating scale and to the antecedent variables of "leadership experience, volunteerism, and gender" (Beck, 2014). The servant leaders of the study were members of a leadership program, who self-reported, as well as encouraged their followers to report on their servant leader behaviors. In the same way, Barbuto et al.'s (2014) sample for a study on emotional intelligence as an antecedent to SL included participants who declared they had SL "behaviors" and were limited to emotional intelligence as a variable. Similarly, Bugenhagen's (2006) qualitative study also questioned leaders with a scale and used raters to assess behaviors, but failed to gather reasons from the servant leaders. To put it bluntly, the research conducted on the antecedents of SL lacks open forum for the voices of the servant leaders.

Arguably, empirical research for servant leaders is needed to discover the antecedent essences of their leadership approaches (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Beck (2014) mentions that self-selection may have biased his sample because "encouraging of those with more initiative, self-efficacy or education to participate" (p. 310-311), but what Beck overlooks is that initiative itself could have been an identifier of potential servant leaders. Ultimately then, the goal of the study is to demonstrate the backgrounds of servant leaders by connecting directly with them to discuss their discovery, use, and ideas about the phenomenon.

Residual calls for research. While the above-mentioned studies were attempts to answer the calls to discover the antecedents of SL, those studies also closed with additional calls for further research. The extended calls from the early studies of antecedents of SL provide support to the research (Amah, 2018; Barbuto et al., 2014; Beck, 2014). Amah (2018) is the most current literature to explore "motivation and self-concept values as possible additional antecedents to SL" (p. 135). Which are the same as in Beck's (2014) research: altruistic mindset, trusting relationships, volunteerism, and leadership experience as well as the influence of another servant leader as mentioned in Hunter et al.'s (2013) study. Respectfully, Amah (2018) scaffolded on the requests of prior research, however there is a need for the servant leader to report their subjective experiences.

Exploring the Antecedents of Servant Leadership

Overall, the studies (Amah, 2018; Barbuto et al., 2014; Beck, 2014) suggest that the antecedents of SL involve traits, on the contrary, one may argue experiences and choice can be an what lead to SL. Amah (2018) agreed by writing "future research should expand the number of antecedents including other self-concept variables… and negative affectivity and other personality variables" (p. 136). Morris et al. (2005) calls for future research in the investigation of how cultures effects humility and the leadership process. Moreover, Beck (2014) called for an exploration of "an individual's motivation to serve" (p. 311) and Amah (2018) answered the call with their study.

Du Plessis et al. (2015) complimented that call by specifically mentioning Barbuto and Wheeler's (2006) proposal that "such variables as emotional intelligence, sources of motivation, flexibility, and openness to experience, or such situational

variables as education, bases of social power, early childhood experiences, organizational

culture, and exposure to servant leaders, all may serve as antecedents" (p. 321).

Additionally, Van Dierendonck (2011) stresses that "providing direction is definitely a

key behavioral characteristic of SL and that the motivation to lead is an antecedent

together with the need to serve" (p. 1251-1252). As a result, the need for research into

what the servant leader declares about the precursors to their choice or experience with

SL is still to be explored.

Chapter III: Method

The qualitative-phenomenological design was used to address the research questions of this study. The researcher compared participants' interview transcripts and two questionnaires with the submitted curricula vitae and interview notes to determine the common antecedents of the servant leader. The timeline of the research study can be found in Appendix D.

Selection of Participants

A criterion sample was used in which participants had to be someone who proclaimed to use SL, professionally or personally. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain criterion samples which "meet some criterion; useful for quality assurance" (p. 159). The declaration of the use of SL in the summary of the participants' LinkedIn profile was considered inclusive in the sample. Lichtenwalner (2018), founder of ModernServantLeader.com, an SL blog, used similar criterion when compiling a list of organizations and leaders which valued and declared use of SL. Upon discovery of this list and with further exploration, a list of CEO's whom utilize SL was discovered; most all of which have a LinkedIn account (Schwantes, 2017). The researcher attempted to connect with servant leaders through the social media platform LinkedIn and email to invite participants to the study. The sample size of those invited extended to 25 participants. However, the actual sample size was just enough, only three participants, and the minimum for phenomenological design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The researcher created a LinkedIn account specifically geared towards introducing the study. The profile identified the researcher as a graduate student conducting research in the forms of two questionnaires and an interview in exploration of

the antecedent commonalities of servant leaders. Before the recruitment materials were

sent out, the researcher attempted to create an annotated bibliography which would have

provided another layer of confirmation that the invited samples met the criteria outlined

above; but it created a confidentiality conflict, so it was not included in the appendices.

Once the research was completed, documented, and the institutional review board

approved the study, then, the consent and data collection process began.

Data Collection Procedures

First, data was collected through a pre-interview questionnaire which addressed

some of the research questions and included the request of supportive documentation, i.e.,

participants' CVs. Second, the researcher conducted individual interviews with the

participants to answer the remainder of the research questions. The design of the study

presented flexibility to the possibility the participants may have wanted to participate in a

focus group in lieu of the interviews – however, this was not an interest of any

participants. Lastly, the participants were asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire.

The design of the last questionnaire was intended to allow the participant time to digest

the interview and report any reflective data they think ought to be included. It also

provided space to discover why the participant agreed to partake in the research, explain

what they might have learned, and was open-ended.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through the use of hybrid methods which include

handwritten notes and NVivo (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The analytical coding

supported the management and organization of the data and the noting of emergent ideas

through coding the personal experiences of those practicing SL (Creswell & Creswell,

2018). The goal was to "develop a textural description [of] *what happened*… a structural description of *how the phenomenon was experienced*…" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 199) and develop the *essence* of the antecedents of SL.

Discussion

The researcher aimed to answer the following questions about how individual leaders resulted in employing SL through the following: distributing a pre-interview questionnaire, requesting a curriculum vitae, conducting a one-on-one interview, and distributing a follow up questionnaire to participants to explore the antecedents of their choice of leadership style.

- The pre-interview questionnaire was designed to answer the questions:
  - What do servant leaders value?
  - How do servant leaders describe SL?
  - How is SL is applied in their daily work?
  - What do servant leaders do for fun?
  - What do they do to take care of themselves, physically and mentally?
  - What do servant leaders hope to contribute to this study?
- The interview questions addressed:
  - What are the antecedents of SL?
  - What were the experiences of the servant leader as a follower?
  - How did their leadership development process begin?
  - When were they were formally introduced to SL?
  - How did their education influence them as a servant?
  - What were other styles of leadership they have used or learned about?

- o What were the characteristics of the best leader they have followed?
- ▪ The post-interview questionnaire questions addressed:
  - o What did the participant of this research learn?
  - o What sustains their motivation to utilize SL?
  - o How has reflecting on their leadership journey renewed their perspective?
  - o What was something they wished they would have said in the interview but never did?
  - o What was their personal reasoning for participating in the study?
  - o What else would they like to contribute to the research of the antecedents of SL?

Ideally, the data collected from participants will aid future research in constructing a framework that identifies and describes the antecedent commonalities of those who use SL. The research study differed from other research conducted in search of answers to the antecedents of SL. First, the research "involve[d] reporting multiple perspectives" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 182) from a diverse sample from various industries. Provided the servant leader a chance to "report how the phenomenon was experienced using significant statements… to describe the *essence* of the experience" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 106) making for a holistic account of the antecedents to SL (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Contribution. The SL research community may benefit from this first phenomenological study of the antecedents of those who practice SL. As mentioned by Creswell (2018), emphasis must be put on "focus[ing] on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring the research or writers express in literature" (p. 182). The rich qualitative interview

transcripts combined with the data in the submitted curricula vitae provide supported

empirical evidence to the research of SL.

Chapter IV: Findings

There were three participants, Earl, Henry, and Juliet (see Appendix E). Each of them consented to participate in the study, submitted their curriculum vitae, a pre-interview questionnaire, completed a telephone or video phone interview, and answered a follow-up questionnaire. Twenty-nine generic codes were initially created using the auto coder feature in NVivo 12. This preliminary coding revealed themes to begin the exploration of the antecedents of SL. The participants mentioned youth experiences, religion and taking care of people the most. Appendix F includes some examples of the significant statements with their formulated meanings. With further exploration, eight themes emerged as the researcher coded all the data collected. The themes that emerged were: (a) practicing and studying Christianity; (b) possessing a desire to help; (c) having self – care habits that included self-education; (d) being influenced as a follower; (e) integrity as a responsibility; (f) military background; (g) supportive planning and training; and (h) compassion as a trait.

Theme 1: Practicing and Studying Christianity

Those who serve as leaders and adopt the SL style are practitioners of religion, Christianity to be precise. As followers of Jesus Christ, servant leaders are often emulating the style in which their savior used when he led people. In their early youth, Earl and Henry mentioned that religion guided them to the principles of SL without ever labeling it as a leadership style but rather a way to life your life. Collectively, they were influenced by the teachings of the bible study it often.

Each of the participants mentioned studying the Bible daily. When asked how he became knowledgeable of SL, Henry replied, "Back to following Christ, it happened

from my youth, being raised in a strong Catholic upbringing. Although it probably wasn't until my young adult in the military that I got a better appreciation for Jesus as a servant leader". Earl answered similarly, when asked what sustains his commitment to practice SL, citing the Bible directly, "My Christian faith. It is the model of Jesus Christ gave us, His disciples; John 13:2-17". When asked why he choose SL as style of leadership Henry answered without hesitation, "In my life journey, in looking for the best model … and research[ing], learning that the greatest servant leader was Jesus Christ, who was the best person to model, all the attributes that one I would aspire to grow into". Juliet was subtle in her mentions of faith and religion, but it is clear she is a follower of Christ as well through her statements, "I believe that spiritual health is an important component of overall health; I attend church weekly and work hard to spend at least a few minutes in the Bible each morning".

Theme 2: Possessing A Desire To Help

People who are servant leaders have a natural desire to help. It is apparent in their choice of careers over the years as consultants, trainers, health care, military, and volunteer positions. When asked why they participated in the study, the reasoning was to help, someone in need and the research of the field. Earl, with many military achievements, talked of followers stating, "We need to help them grow as leaders or help them prepare for their next position of leadership". Juliet expressed a similar desire to help mentioning her role as a leader is to "identify the problem, helping them [the followers] come up with solutions [and provide] information to get them there." Similarly, Henry mentioned "service over self" as a way of life, which is a true sign of humility.

Theme 3: Having Self-Care Habits That Included Self-Education

One of the questions on the pre-interview questionnaire was regarding self-care; all three participants' verbatim answers can be seen in Appendix G. Also, to be noted are all the agreements about ways they care for themselves. Including but not limited to their routines, their relationships, and their ways of thinking. Assuring adequate sleep, exercise, and appropriate dieting as a way of taking care of themselves was a habit of the participants. These practices accompanied by spending quality time with families, occasionally indulging in personal hobbies, studying and worshiping, and exercise were among the things that the servants do to take care of themselves. Interestingly, there was an emphasis on self-education that they each expressed.

Educating themselves was a frequently mentioned commonality of all three participants. The pre-interview answers from the entire sample shed light on the servant leader's routine of self-education. Each of the participants mentioned reading from the bible daily, mediation, and personal reading as part of how they care for themselves. In the pre-interview questionnaire as well as the follow-up questionnaire, the researcher asked the participants why they consented to be involved in the study, two of the participants mentioned on separate questionnaires, their desire to learn. Even though there is not much of a theme in the participants' formal education, the theme of self-education is ultimately what led each of the participants to the definition of SL. Appendix H shows the exact points in time where the researcher believes each of participants began to understand what SL was as a concept and who introduced it to them, which eventually led them each to Greenleaf (1977). Though all slightly different, they found SL through self-education.

Theme 4: Being Influenced As A Follower

Those who practice SL were influenced by leaders they have followed as well as the religion they practiced throughout their lives. Earl mentioned the impact his father had on him is why he is using SL now,

My father did that from the time that I was aware. He was constantly looking for ways to serve his community, to serve others. It was not about building his power base. It was about taking care of needs within the church, the community, his family, his country being a World War II veteran. There's something for you to do. My kids joke about my standard comment is do something with redeeming value. I think that's what a servant leader attempts to do at all times, to personally do something with redeeming value and to help his or her people do something with redeeming value, something that builds them up as opposed to building the leader up and accomplishes a greater good.

Henry similarly further emphasized that servant leaders are "doing it in their family, they're doing it in public", not just their jobs. While contemplating an answer Earl also emphasized, "I think there's a bit of both, but I don't know which was the stronger, the influence from others, from outside, or an innate capability". Thus, the phenomenon is still occurring. When asked to describe the characteristics of the best leaders they have followed, the three participants mentioned the 12 charted characteristics displayed in Appendix I. After analyzation the poem in Appendix J was created by the researcher using words used by each participant to describe their best leader as a exercise in analyzing the data.

Theme 5: Integrity As A Responsibility

Integrity is the formation of a moral character, a "most important characteristic of a leader, and one that he or she must be prepared to demonstrate again and again (Bennis, 2009, pp. xvii & xxvi). As defined by Merriam-Webster (2019) integrity is the "firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values : incorruptibility" (p.1).

When asked what sustains their motivation to practice SL, Henry and Earl mentioned it being a part of their personal mission. All the participants mentioned *doing the right thing* on multiple occasions. Earl affirmed that integrity should always be a first of value reminding us the value is "not just honesty, but completeness of character". Along the same lines, Henry described integrity as "service before self – always put the mission and those who count on you first, above your own comfort and self-recognition". As well as confirming integrity as a characteristic of the servant leader, these results open the door to studies that could study integrity as *the antecedent* of SL.

Responsibility was coded many times in the questions about values, the description of a great leader, and specifically when asked what the antecedents of SL may be. In his opinion, Henry loosely explains that the antecedents of SL are "quite simply, as doing the right thing". Earl expressed comparably, "my standard comment is do something with redeeming value". Henry discussed how responsibility can simply mean when "the opportunities show up for us … opportunities to serve and do the right thing, that requires making a conscious decision" and that is responsibility.

Theme 6: Military Background

Both Earl and Henry served time in the military. When asked the describe their structured leadership development they both mentioned their time in the armed forces;

one in the Navy for six years and another in the Air Force for 10 years. Equally, they both served in the military right after they graduated high school. Most interesting is that both discovered the term and definition of SL through military reinforcement of their religious upbringings.

When trying to describe to the researcher when they were formally introduced to SL Earl explained it as, "Something that we knew was percolating in us or we had a concept of, but we couldn't label it. We couldn't hang all these thoughts on one entity". In the same way Henry, who served in the military, clarified that "it happened from my youth, being raised in a strong Catholic upbringing. Although it probably wasn't until my young adult in the military that I got a better appreciation for Jesus as a servant leader". The layer of religion and military backgrounds led to both becoming servant leaders. These results leave much to be discovered in the way of military and religion as a convincing antecedent to practicing SL.

Theme 7: Supportive Planning And Training

All the participants in this study, at one point in their lives, were employed as a trainer of one sort or another. Juliet conducted training in a human resources project for 9 years in the state of Maine. Henry has been leading an entrepreneurial training program in the state of Florida. Lastly Earl "wrote [and] reviewed inputs to national level operational plans and training programs" for Air Force Logistics. Other sub themes of training were mentions of performance building, team building, lifelong learning and contributing to something with "redeeming value".

In this theme, strategic planning was found throughout all the participants' curriculum vitae. Consulting and coaching were also referenced as jobs for the

participants. Using SL in their strategic planning was a theme of the participants' reports. As a way of making decisions, the participants rely on their SL strategies to include others. This strategic planning includes followers in decision making. Juliet mentioned that "a good leader knows his or her individual people and approaches them based on their strengths". By extension, being knowledgeable was mentioned by all three participants when asked to describe traits of the best leader they have followed. This commonality in a trait of their most admired leader, seems to offer a leader the opportunity to plan based on their knowledge. This is Earl's description, "He was competent. He knew his profession. He knew where his specialty fit into the greater mission. He knew how to interact with other organizations within the larger organization. He knew how to set standards. He knew how to enforce standards".

Supportive (adj.). The theme of support shows up amongst the data in many different documents and in various subthemes. In the participants' curriculum vitae, in their definitions of SL, in their descriptions of great leaders they have followed, and their multiple mentions to support my research by helping provide data. The word support was coded 18 times in the sample curriculum vitae; referenced by Earl 8 times, by Henry 5 times, and by Juliet 5 times. These findings strengthen the theme of supportiveness as an antecedent to practicing SL. Although support may seem trivial, it is in fact crucial in terms of today's concern over leadership being separated from followership.

Supportive (v.). When asked to define SL, in their opinion, each of them had similar answers emphasizing support of their followers. Juliet responded,

It's setting the example by doing the work, not just asking others to do it. Pitching in and doing what it takes to get the job done, and not simply delegating. I think SL is much

more than that: it's being interested in your team members' home lives as well as their work lives, cooking them breakfast at a staff meeting [or] helping someone load their car full of collateral for a provider meeting.

Earl asserted SL meant

> Caring for and about those you are entrusted to lead. It is not the leader who accomplishes the organization's mission; rather, the many people who report to the leader accomplish the myriad of tasks that make an organization/mission successful. It is the leader's duty to support – organize, train, equip, advocate for, praise and correct – the men and women who execute the mission. Servant leaders are accessible to their people – they know them on the job. The good ones know about their people's lives, successes and challenges beyond the work place and look for opportunities to care for their employees as people too. The ultimate example of servant-leadership is Jesus Christ who did not seek to make His life more comfortable; He came to help and heal, spiritually and physically, as their servant.

And Henry corroborated their descriptions with a straightforward definition; he expressed that SL was simply "service above self".

Theme 8: Compassion As A Trait

Taking care of people was coded 21 times in through all the data collected, mentioned by all three participants. Participants mentioned being a support 18 times and being involved and invested 16 times. Traces of compassion were evident in the participants' questionnaire and interview answers; however, it was not until the analysis began that the theme began to form. After all, Earl and Juliet both admitted they

participated "mostly because someone needed my [help] but it was mostly about helping

another human being out" and "to help you stimulate and inspire future leaders". The

desire to help, take care of people, and provide support were articulated by all the

participants in various ways throughout the data collected.

Chapter V: Discussion

In this study, individuals who practiced SL explained their reasonings for using the style. Descriptions of their influencers combined with mentions of their own experiences, and recollections of how they discovered SL emerged throughout the interviews that took place via telecommunications. The data illuminated the life of a servant leader and the essence of them before discovering SL. Further, the data of this study shed light on the development of the leader who serves. This study is the first phenomenological study of the antecedents of SL and shall serve as a catalyst for more.

Theoretical Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the antecedents of those who support and/or employ SL within their work and/or personal lives. Greenleaf (1977) asserted that "the best test [for identifying the servant leader], and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as [people]?" (p. 27). The participants, who claim and are assumed to be servant leaders, described characteristics of the best leaders they have followed and the resulting descriptors (Appendix I) are exact to the self-awareness (Barbuto et al., 2014; Beck, 2014; Du Plessis et al., 2015), the humility (C. Morris, 2016), and listening skills (Sendjaya, 2015) mention in their studies of the servant leader. The exposure to servant leaders creates more servant leaders as predicted by Greenleaf (1977) and Barbuto & Wheeler (2006). The described leaders of the participants of this study show the full circled effect SL can create, which was emphasized by others as well (Greenleaf, 1977; Hunter et al., 2013).

This research study found agreements with various researcher's work. Barbuto & Wheeler (2006) suggested early childhood experiences as an antecedent and Beck (2014)

and Du Plessis et al. (2015) suggested time as an antecedent. The results of this study agree with these theories since religion, career, and decision-making take time to form. Servant leaders are thus formed over time with influences that are vital to when the individual is introduced to SL.

The results of this study are in agreement with the study on emotional intelligence as an antecedent of SL (Barbuto et al., 2014), related to the themes of this study: integrity and compassion. Beck (2014) found that giving back had meaning to his participants. This desire to give back can be associated with the themes found in this study: integrity as a responsibility, compassion as a trait, and humility. Beck (2014) also mentioned the desire for honest communication and a "other's orientation" (p. 308) as antecedents which can also be associated with the results found in this study, specifically having the desire to help.

Future Research

Further research is needed to compare and contrast the results of this study with the other studies (Amah, 2018; Barbuto et al., 2014; Beck, 2014; Bugenhagen, 2006) on the antecedents of SL to cross analyze and narrow down the themes more precisely. Since the results of this study and others (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Beck, 2014; Du Plessis et al., 2015) deliver confirmation that the servant leader takes time, there is a gap to fill in a terms of searching for evidence of the antecedents with time and long-term research taken into consideration.

Arguably, the most significant contribution, and also an avenue for further research, is the discovery that SL is both a choice (Olsby, 2011) and a natural inclination (Amah, 2018). The results of this study help to validate the research of others in search of

the preceding essence of SL (Berger, 2014; Franklin, 2010; Hunter et al., 2013; C.

Morris, 2016; Sun, 2013). Overall, the results suggest that SL reproduces servant leaders

and Christianity, self-education, and compassion are antecedents of SL.

Conclusion

The study provides empirical insight into the antecedents of servant leadership. In

short, the findings provided initial evidence of the exact manifestation of the use of SL. It

is in the crossroads of desiring to serve and having the opportunity to lead that SL begins.

The SL phenomenon is alive and well and still needs to be explored vastly. As

organizations and individuals continue to incorporate SL into their lives, there is now

evidence to suggest that it is something that is instilled, modeled, and decided on as a

strategy to serve and lead together.

Appendix B

FINAL APPROVAL FORM
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
MA IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES

May 10, 2019

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Maria Kindelan entitled Exploring Antecedents of Those Who Practice Servant Leadership be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Leadership Studies

_____ Thesis Advisor
Dr. Sharon Timberlake

_____ Second Reader
Dr. Daniel Jenkins

Accepted

_____ Chair, Leadership and

Organizational Studies - Dr. Daniel Jenkins, Ph.D.

IRB Training Certificate

Appendix A

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

The following documentation is requested* to support your unique perspective

> ➢ **CV**

*Providing this documentation is instrumental in validating the experiences referenced in the interviews as well as adding insight to the data of the study.

1.   What do you value, as a leader?

2.   In your own words, describe servant leadership.

3.   How do you apply servant leadership in your daily work?

4.   What do you do for fun?

5.   What do you do to take care of yourself, physically & mentally?

6.   What do you hope to contribute to this study?

Please attach the supportive documents with the return of this questionnaire

Appendix B

Interview Protocol
Exploring the Antecedents of Servant Leadership

Date & Time:	Interviewee:
Phone/Video/In Person:	Current Position of Interviewee:
Interviewer: Maria Kindelan	Have you completed the Clifton Strengths Finder? What were your top 5 strengths? -------------

	Questions
1	*Thinking about traits/characteristics, experiences, events, or influences…* **In your opinion, what are the antecedents to servant leadership?** *Why did you choose servant leadership?*
2	**What are your experiences with servant leadership as a follower?**
3	*Describe your career path…* **When did your structured leadership development process begin?**
4	**When did you formally get introduced to servant leadership?** *Who, how, where… what did you think of it then?*
5	**How did your education influence you as a servant?**
6	**Describe other styles of leadership you have used.** *What other leadership styles have you learned about?*
7	**What were the characteristics of the best leader you have followed?**

Appendix C

Follow Up Questionnaire

This study was made possible by you. On behalf of the researcher, the University of Southern Maine, and the greater good of servant leadership research and awareness –

Thank you!

Requests for a copy of the results will be granted from the researcher upon request – maria.kindelan@maine.edu

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1.   As a participant of this research study, what did you learn?

2.   What sustains your motivation to practice servant leadership?

3.   How has reflecting on your leadership journey renewed your perspective?

4.   What is something you wish you would have said in the interview but never did?

5.   What was your personal reasoning for participating in the study?

6.   Is there anything else you would like to contribute to the research of the antecedents of servant leadership?

Your stories were instrumental in this research – Compliments to you, the servant leader!

Appendix D

Study Timeline

Stage	Activity	Estimated		Deliverables
		Start Date	End Date	
Data Collection	Finalize sampling plan	Aug 2018	Aug 2018	Sampling plan
	Develop data collection instrument	Aug 2018	Aug 2018	Draft data collection instruments
	Confirm reference, use, or support of Servant Leadership – create reference list	Sept 2018	Sept 2018	Pool of confirmed potential participants
	IRB Process / Pilot Study	Accepted for review Sept. 12th	Sept 2018	**IRB Approval** & Finalized data collection instrument
	Recruit Subjects & Obtain Consent	Sept 2018	Sept 2018	Participants for the study & consent
	Distribute Pre-Interview Questionnaire & Request CVs	Sept 2018	Oct 2018	Phase 1 of data collection complete
	Conduct Interviews	Oct 2018	Nov 2018	Phase 2 of data collection complete
	Distribute Post-Interview Questionnaires	Nov 2018	Nov 2018	Data collection completed
	Write up data collection	Nov 2018	Dec 2018	Draft data collection section for final report
Data Analysis	Prepare data for analysis	Dec 2018	Jan 2019	Data ready for analysis (e.g. interview transcripts and supportive documents)
	Analyze data	Jan 2019	Feb 2019	Notes and other output from analysis
	Draw Conclusions	Mar 2019	Mar 2019	Draft data analysis and finding section of final report
Writing Up	Final draft of report	Apr 2019	Apr 2019	Final draft
	Review draft with peers and professors	Apr 2019	May 2019	Notes of feedback
	Final editing	May 2019	May 2019	Final report

Appendix E

Profiles of Participants

	Job Title	Residence	CV Intro
Earl*	Life Group Ministry Coordinator, Grace Point Church *Before Retirement: Director, Service to the Armed Forces American Red Cross*	Maine	Servant-leader committed to providing vision, strategic direction and leadership to allow coworkers to safely provide quality support, services and resources to clients.
Henry*	President/CEO Be One, Inc., Coaching and Consulting Firm & Regional Program Manager Career Source Entrepreneurial Training Program	Florida	Senior Executive with a successful record of leading performance improvements over a broad range of businesses with a demonstrated ability to drive strategic, financial and operational excellence while restructuring and building strong, motivated teams. A high energy, hands-on, results oriented leader with extensive business and information technology development and support experience that includes a passion for giving back through community service (servant leadership).
Juliet*	Senior Consultant, Organizational Readiness, Scripps Health	Maine/ Wisconsin	Servant leader, guiding executives as they lead their organizations through culture change. Proven ability to build relationships, facilitate complex discussions and decision making, and resolve conflicts. Strong problem-solving and analytical skills; ability to partner with teams to strategize solutions. Keen ability to track and assess priorities and successfully manage multiple demands within compact timeframes.

Appendix F

Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Participants Who Practice Servant Leadership and Related Formulated Meanings

Name	Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning
Juliet	I think the other key parts of servant leadership are making those tough decisions, but still making people feel like they have been heard	Servant leaders choose to listen to others with compassion, while still making necessary decisions
Earl	Doing the right thing... getting back to how the world and the opportunities show up for us is when there are opportunities to serve and do the right thing, that requires making a conscious decision.	Choosing to do the right thing and wanting to maintain integrity is what led me to use servant leadership.
Henry	Back to following Christ, it happened from my youth, being raised in a strong Catholic upbringing. Although it probably wasn't until my young adult in the military that I got a better appreciation for Jesus as a servant leader.	I became knowledgeable of servant leadership through my youth, being raised Catholic. As an adult in the military, I came to appreciate Jesus as a servant leader.

Appendix G

Answers to Question #5 of Pre-Interview Questionnaire

|	
Earl	Exercise is key: physical, spiritual and mental. Daily I start with Bible study and prayer for others and the challenges coming in my day. I fit in an hour of physical exercise 4-5 days per week. I typically close the day by reading an insightful book for about 30-45 minutes before going to sleep each night. Another important part of personal care is spending time with people I care about – my wife, family and/or friend. I can't always spend time in person, but the wonders of technology allow me to invest that time via phone, video conferencing or text.
Henry	Diet, exercise, sleep, meditation, reading and podcasts, nurturing important relationships
Juliet	Up until the last year or so, I was actively running, participating in 5K and 10K runs, and even a triathlon a couple of years ago. For the last eighteen months, I have lived in Gorham, Maine and commuted to San Diego, CA to work weekly. My commute is 12 hours door to door on Sunday and Thursday of each week, which causes me to work my 40-50 hours on Monday through Thursday, with a few hours on the weekend. In this current season, I'm not able to spend as much time being physically active as I used to but anticipate being able to get back to running in the next couple of months. I work hard to make sure that I get 7-8 hours of sleep each night, which helps with my mental health. I eat a very low carb diet, which helps me with my traveling and crazy hours. I believe that spiritual health is an important component of overall health; I attend church weekly and work hard to spend at least a few minutes in the Bible each morning, though I'm more successful with that some weeks than others.

Appendix H

Learning about Servant Leadership as a Concept

	Experience	Introduced By:
Earl	A Book - The Heart of Godly Leadership by Hudson Armerding	Officer's Christian Fellowship
Henry	A Book – The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey	Pursued Self-Education in Leadership and Management
Juliet	A Mentor – Summarized her explanation of her personal leadership style	A Career Coach and An Executive Coach

Appendix I

Hierarchy of Described Characteristics of the Best Leader the Participants Followed

Characteristics of the Best Leader Participant has Followed
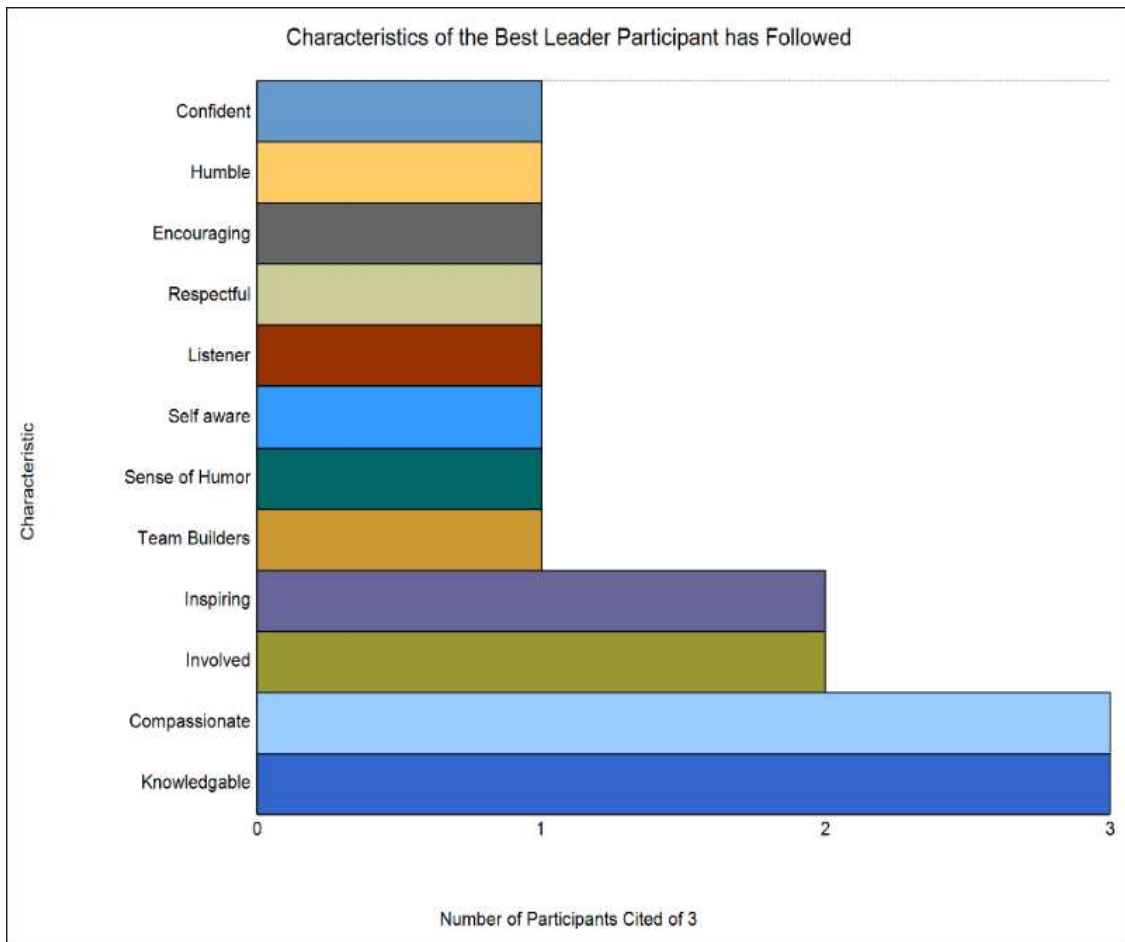
Appendix J

Serving Leadership: A Poem

A respectful listener.

Humble and kind.

Confident, postured to be successful.

There to oversee, monitor, and provide encouragement…

With support.

Team builder.

Use humor to break tension so they catch their breath.

Self-aware.

Willing, not expectant.

Written by: Maria Kindelan

04/15/19

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