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## **Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

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January 11, 2021

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Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

The Effect of Servant Leadership on Nonprofit Workplace Conflict

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Lorena M. Freeborough

January 2021

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated first and foremost to my savior, my rock, and my strength, Jesus Christ, who brought me on this journey to draw me closer to him, give me a deeper understanding of his nature, his unconditional love, and to show me that I can “do all things through him who gives me strength.” Thank you, Lord, for giving me the strength, wisdom, courage, and guidance during the last three years to help me persevere and accomplish something I could have never dreamed of! It is because of you I endeavored to take this on, and it is to You whom I owe everything, the greatest example and most sacrificial servant leader of all. I love You so much, and I cannot wait to spend eternity with You!

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## Abstract

Workplace conflict depletes nonprofit organizations of valuable time and energy. Organizations spend millions of dollars because of the financial and human cost of unresolved interpersonal conflict in the workplace that stem from ineffective leadership behaviors. A leader's ineffective behaviors have been linked to the organizational pressures that can cause and spread counterproductive workplace behavior, which results in interpersonal conflict and great financial cost. The purpose of this quantitative correlational study was to determine the relationship between servant leadership behaviors and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. Specifically, the intended goal of this research was to understand if leaders utilizing a servant leadership style reduced interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Correlational analysis investigated the relationships between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict, using an online survey of 329 nonprofit employees in the United States. Participants completed the Servant Leadership Survey that measures servant leadership behaviors through eight subscales and the Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale that measures interpersonal workplace conflict through four subscales. Overall, results suggested a significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict. The results support the initial hypothesis that higher levels of servant leadership lead to lower levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

*Keywords:* servant leadership, interpersonal conflict, ineffective leadership, poor leadership, effective leadership behaviors, decreased workplace conflict

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Organizations spend millions of dollars as a result of the financial and human cost of unresolved interpersonal conflict in the workplace that stem from ineffective leadership behaviors (Hill, 2016; Hyman, 2013; Liu et al., 2015; McKenzie, 2015; Taylor & Pattie, 2014). Detrimental behaviors such as lack of clear communication, bullying, retaliation, and harassment among others have been linked to the organizational pressures that can cause and spread counterproductive workplace behavior which results in interpersonal conflict (Baillien et al., 2014; Leon-Perez et al., 2016; Taylor & Pattie, 2014; Torkelson et al., 2016). A leader's negative actions can influence follower behaviors and organizational culture through role modeling that results in employees' reciprocation of the behavior creating a contentious work environment (Gouldner, 1960; Schein, 2010; Torkelson et al., 2016).

By not modeling appropriate behaviors, demonstrating genuine concern, or selflessly helping employees deal with conflict, supervisors can harm organizations by allowing lower forms of social undermining that can result in human and financial loss (Jimmieson et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2015; McKenzie, 2015; Torkelson et al., 2016). As a result of ineffective leadership behaviors in dealing with conflict, organizations can be impacted by the damaging human and financial effects from increased turnover, litigation, workers compensation claims, and absences among other costly consequences (Liu et al., 2015; McKenzie, 2015). Because leaders can greatly influence employee's behaviors, it is of utmost importance that organizations invest in the development of leaders who promote a more peaceful work environment. Further research is needed to determine if servant leadership is effective in dealing with interpersonal workplace conflict. Characterized by a service ethic, servant leadership theory may help address this problem, as it has been linked to beneficial outcomes at individual and organizational levels

(Liden et al., 2014). Individual benefits such as follower trust and engagement have been shown to result from servant leadership as the leader chooses to selflessly serve others to meet their needs, even if it means placing those needs above their own (Simons & Peterson, 2000; van Dierendonck, 2011). By inspiring followers through their kindness and genuine concern, servant leaders may help organizations flourish as follower commitment is strengthened (Greenleaf, 2016; Parris & Peachey, 2013; van Dierendonck, 2011). Resolving interpersonal conflict in the workplace via a servant leadership approach requires further study to help organizations fulfill their vision without the impediments of the financial and employee costs that come as a result of ineffective leadership behaviors in dealing with workplace conflict.

### **Background of the Problem**

Interpersonal conflict in organizations can stem from ineffective leadership behaviors regarding how leaders deal with conflict. In a quantitative study that examined the escalation of interpersonal workplace conflict between an employee and a supervisor and its resulting strain, Jimmieson et al. (2017) found that unresolved task conflict with one's supervisor escalated and led to relationship conflict over a period of 10 months resulting in higher strain, burnout, and increased turnover intentions. Interpersonal conflict can result from the flawed perception, and interpretation of conflict in dyadic interactions (Humphrey et al., 2017). Taylor and Pattie (2014) proposed that a leader's actions could impact employee's behaviors and as such, they should be trained in ethical practices that can benefit the entire organization. According to Jimmieson et al. (2017), the foundation of workplace conflict generally stems from the interaction between two or more employees and leaders have the power to influence this behavior. By extension, leaders can harm the organization by not modeling appropriate behavior and helping their employees effectively deal with conflict.

Studies have shown that a leader's failure to provide employees with support and direction can lead to a decrease in unity and an increase in conflict (O'Sullivan, 2017). Torkelson et al. (2016) contended that supervisors are regarded as role models of behavior in the workplace, and their ineffective leadership can negatively influence the entire organization. When employees observe their leader's inadequate use of power (e.g., discrimination or harassment), they will either retaliate or reciprocate the behavior as an attempt to bring fairness to an unjust situation (Torkelson et al., 2016).

Unresolved interpersonal conflict in the workplace can financially impact organizations due to increased turnover, litigations, and workers comp claims among others. If conflict is not resolved effectively, employees may seek alternative ways to resolve or cope with it that may include leaving their organization, suing, or filing worker's compensation claims, all which costs companies thousands of dollars. McKenzie (2015) discussed that some employees seek temporary relief from the psychological stress of workplace conflict by disconnecting from the work environment through sickness absences that may include filing worker's compensation claims. Hyman (2013) commented the cost for organizations to defend an employment lawsuit could range from \$175,000 to \$250,000 depending on whether they settle or decide to go to trial. This supports Virani's (2015) view that when conflict is handled effectively, people feel acknowledged and this may reduce formal complaints that can lead to costly legal actions. To restore balance in their work lives, some employees may resign or sue their employer, but others may opt to deal with conflict in a passive-aggressive way by avoiding the workplace altogether.

The negative effects of unresolved interpersonal conflict in the workplace can also be seen in the human cost incurred by organizations resulting from a decrease in productivity, engagement, satisfaction, morale, and commitment. Schilpzand et al. (2016) emphasized that

workplace incivility can cost organizations \$14,000 per employee on an annual basis due to distractions from work as employees withdraw to avoid an instigator, which affects productivity. If the instigator is the supervisor, then the problem is exacerbated as the employee tries to avoid or undermine their leadership. Furthermore, it has been reported that employees may take out their frustrations on customers, which further increases the cost to organizations resulting from decreased profits (Schilpzand et al., 2016).

Human costs of unresolved conflict can also be seen in employee burnout and lack of motivation that affects morale and commitment. Halevy et al. (2014) contended that workplace conflict is directly related to anxiety, frustration, and burnout. This has important implications for organizations because when employees experience burnout, they become easily frustrated and are less likely to be engaged and satisfied at work. Furthermore, research shows that interpersonal conflict affects employee motivation which can lead to biased processing of information (de Wit et al., 2013). Jimmieson et al. (2017) agreed that relationship conflict affects information processing because of the increased time that employees spend on each other rather than on the work, which results in poor performance in the long-term. Information processing is also impacted by individuals involved in relationship conflict, who may withhold information or provide a lower exchange of information with their coworkers and supervisor to reciprocate or retaliate the bad behavior (Humphrey et al., 2017).

Healthy conflict that leads to stronger personal relationships and increased creativity can be good for organizations, but the cost of unresolved conflict to organizations can cause significant negative outcomes. While Jung and Lee (2015) asserted that having some conflict can promote creativity and innovation, low levels of information exchange resulting from interpersonal conflict negatively impacts performance over time (Humphrey et al., 2017).

Furthermore, social learning theory posits that individuals learn by observing and replicating other's behaviors (Bandura, 1977), which implies that as individuals observe their supervisor's or coworker's negative behavior, they will imitate it, resulting in indirect sabotage and biased decision-making that eventually leads to a greater cost to the organization (Humphrey et al., 2017; Torkelson et al., 2016).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Workplace conflict depletes nonprofit organizations of valuable time and energy. Ineffective leadership behaviors such as poor communication, lack of collaboration and antagonistic exchanges among others (Budd et al., 2020; de Wit et al., 2012; Syed & Zia, 2013) can create contentious organizational cultures that result in great financial cost. Scholars have found that interpersonal conflict in the workplace may have detrimental human and financial consequences (Jimmieson et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2015; McKenzie, 2015). Organizations can be negatively impacted by the human costs of workplace conflict that include decreased organizational performance (Longe, 2015), increased absence and tardiness (Liu et al., 2015) and decreased motivation (de Wit et al., 2013) that come as a result of an employee's job-related stress, burnout and increased turnover intentions (Jimmieson et al., 2017). The hours spent on interpersonal conflict at work comes with great financial cost to organizations. Increased turnover rates hurt organizations tremendously; as it costs an average of \$4,129 per hire and about 42 days for employers to fill vacant positions (Hill, 2016). In a recent survey conducted by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), the annual turnover rate was reported at 19%, and the turnover rate for involuntary terminations was 8% (Hill, 2016). Therefore, for every 100 employees, an organization will pay a minimum of \$78,451 per year to replace 19 positions in addition to the costs associated with involuntary separations.



Workplace conflict can also result in negative human impact. As employees seek alternative ways to cope with the anxiety and stress resulting from interpersonal conflict, organizations may see an increase in sick leave and worker's comp claims (Dijkstra et al., 2012; Jimmieson et al., 2017; Virani, 2015). Scholars have also found that workplace conflict is linked to increased workplace bullying (Baillien et al., 2014; Leon-Perez et al., 2015), which can result in behavioral, physical and psychological strain for employees (Bruk-Lee et al., 2013).

Scholars have investigated workplace conflict from various perspectives such as work-related stress (Sardana, 2018), lack of effective feedback (Madalina, 2016), and a lack of communication (Syed & Zia, 2013); all of which have been found to lead to sickness, depression, low productivity and damaged relationships (Madalina, 2016; Sardana, 2018; Syed & Zia, 2013). Because leaders are often regarded as role models, their leadership style and ability to manage conflict well can have a significant impact on the culture, health and function of an organization (Jit et al., 2016; Torkelson et al., 2016). While many studies have sought to understand the implications of conflict in the workplace (Brubaker et al., 2014; Bruk-Lee et al., 2013; de Wit et al., 2013; Humphrey et al., 2017), further research is needed to investigate the impact of a supervisor's leadership behaviors on interpersonal conflict (Brubaker et al., 2014; Gilin Oore et al., 2015). While other theories such as transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership emphasize ethics, organizational outcomes, and follower wellbeing, their motivation and focus are on the leader's values, rules, and goals that may lead to manipulation, narcissism, and other selfish acts (Eva et al., 2019; Graham, 1991; van Dierendonck, 2011). In contrast, servant leadership theory has a moral and selfless component that focuses on genuinely caring about follower's growth and needs which enhances interpersonal trust and respect (Graham, 1991; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Spears, 2004). Because servant leader behaviors have been shown to

enhance key elements of effective conflict management such as collaboration, communication, trust and respect among followers (Fields, 2018; Jit et al., 2017, Joseph, 2006; Simons & Peterson, 2000), this leadership style may prove to be the most effective way to create a peaceful organizational culture that has minimal workplace conflict. Exploring the effect of servant leader behavior on interpersonal workplace conflict can help organizations effectively fulfill their mission while reducing the negative consequences that come from unresolved interpersonal conflict. Thus, it is imperative for organizations to understand how the servant leadership style may impact workplace conflict.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this quantitative correlational study was to determine the relationship between servant leadership behaviors and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. Nonprofit, service organizations are regarded as more static and stable work environments that are conducive to servant leadership behaviors that are selfless and others-oriented (Ghosh & Khatri, 2018; Liden et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2004). The intended goal of this research was to understand if leaders utilizing a servant leadership style have a mitigating effect on workplace conflict. Specifically, this study examined the relationship between the subscales of servant leadership (standing back, forgiveness, courage, empowerment, accountability, authenticity, humility, and stewardship) and the subscales of interpersonal workplace conflict (task outcome, task process, relationship, non-task organizational conflict). A sample of 327 nonprofit employees in the United States was asked to complete a questionnaire that had questions from the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) that measures servant leadership (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2010) and the Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale (ICOS) that measures interpersonal workplace conflict (Lee, 2007).

## Research Questions

RQ1: What is the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings?

*H1<sub>0</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.

*H1<sub>A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.

*H1<sub>10</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.

*H1<sub>1A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.

*H1<sub>20</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.

*H1<sub>2A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.

*H1<sub>30</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.

*H1<sub>3A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.

*H1<sub>40</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of non-task organizational conflict.

*H1<sub>4A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task non-task organizational conflict.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Culture.** A group's shared basic assumptions learned through experience and accumulated learning derived from a leader's behavior role modeling (Schein, 2010).

**Interpersonal conflict.** Relational strain due to disagreements, interference and negative emotional experiences as a result of task outcome, task process, relationship and non-task organizational differences (Lee, 2007).

**Nontask organizational conflict.** Disagreements caused by disputes over company policies, organizational power, non-task related issues, and because of poor organizational leadership (Lee, 2007).

**Process conflict.** Disagreements about how work tasks are assigned, how they are delegated, and how they are accomplished (Jehn, 1997).

**Relationship conflict.** Issues among coworkers that pertain to interpersonal relationships, personality differences, or emotional interactions (Jehn, 1997; Lee, 2007).

**Task conflict.** Disagreements among employees pertaining to the job or project. Differences of opinions regarding what is done to accomplish a work goal (Jehn, 1997).

### **Summary**

Unresolved conflict can potentially have negative human and monetary impact on organizations. Ineffective leadership behaviors can potentially permeate through an organization and cause further damage as employees imitate the behavior or retaliate through passive-aggressive means. If leaders are not prepared to handle interpersonal conflict effectively, employees may seek to restore balance and fairness in a way that can increase counterproductive

behaviors in the workplace, thereby increasing interpersonal workplace conflict. This problem is further exacerbated by the astronomical costs of litigation, worker's compensation costs and the amount of time and money it takes for organizations to hire replacements. While some conflict may be beneficial in promoting creativity and other positive business outcomes, the cost of interpersonal conflict makes a compelling case for further research on how leaders can most effectively handle conflict. Because a leader's role modeling of effective behaviors can create organizational cultures that manage conflict effectively (Brubaker et al., 2014; Gelfand et al., 2012) and servant leader behaviors have been linked to successful conflict management styles (Jit et al., 2016), it is important to understand if the participative, others-oriented style that servant leaders model helps reduce interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Findings of this research can have positive implications for organizations such as fulfilling their goals while providing employees with a healthy work environment that retains its workforce. Chapter 2 of this study will review the theoretical framework and the literature on interpersonal organizational conflict and servant leadership.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Studies have revealed that ineffective leadership behaviors in dealing with workplace conflict can result in negative outcomes for organizations as seen through decreased performance and motivation and increased stress, burnout, and turnover intentions (de Wit et al., 2013; Jimmieson et al., 2017; Longe, 2015). Unresolved workplace conflict can result in financial consequences stemming from increased absenteeism, worker's compensation claims, and litigation expenses (Hyman, 2013; McKenzie, 2015); all of which divert the organization from fulfilling their mission. Leaders, who are regarded as role models in the workplace can negatively impact an organization's culture through ineffective behaviors that breakdown trust and respect, thereby increasing workplace conflict (Deutsch, 1973; Schein, 2010; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Interpersonal relationships in organizations are negatively affected when leaders fail to address workplace conflict, provide effective feedback or clear communication, and by failing to address damaging antisocial behavior (Madalina, 2016; Syed & Zia, 2013; Torkelson et al., 2016). The moral and selfless component of servant leadership theory include behaviors of empathy, service, and humility that engender collaboration, trust and respect which are conducive to more peaceful approaches to managing and resolving interpersonal conflict in the workplace (Fields, 2018; Jit et al., 2016; Joseph, 2006; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Understanding what servant leadership behaviors are conducive to lower levels of interpersonal conflict can help organizations fulfill their mission through a more satisfied, engaged and committed workforce.

Behaviors displayed by servant leaders have been linked to high levels of employee engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). These outcomes are inspired by the presence and nature of the servant leader, as they

selflessly put other's needs above their own and in turn, inspire followers to reciprocate the leader's respect, trust, and loyalty (Greenleaf, 2016; Parris & Peachey, 2013). The purpose of this study is to understand the association between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. Specifically, this quantitative study's research question seeks to investigate the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings through a social learning and social exchange theoretical framework.

The literature research strategy included the use of search engines from two University libraries. First, Abilene Christian University's (ACU) online Margaret and Herman Brown Library database was used to collect sources through OneSearch and InterLibrary Loan. Second, Liberty University's online Jerry Falwell Library database was used to collect sources through Academic Search Ultimate. The following keywords were used in both library searches:

- Servant leadership
- Servant leadership behaviors
- Servant leadership outcomes
- Workplace interpersonal conflict
- Task conflict
- Relational conflict
- Conflict management

These keyword searches and subsequent review of the related literature led to the identification of additional peer-reviewed articles and scholarly textbooks. The totality of the research findings from these searches provided a solid foundation from which to investigate and contribute to the scholarly conversation regarding servant leadership and interpersonal organizational conflict.

The remainder of this chapter will review the literature on interpersonal organizational conflict and servant leadership. The first section of the literature review includes a detailed evaluation of the study's theoretical framework and how it relates to this study's assumptions and perspectives. The second section of this chapter reviews the literature on the nature of interpersonal conflict in the workplace along with its sources, types, outcomes, and the leader's role in conflict management and resolution. Next, this study explores servant leadership theory, seminal works, outcomes, and how servant leader behaviors shape organizational culture and how this connects to interpersonal workplace conflict. Building upon Robert Greenleaf's seminal works on servant leadership theory, the final part of this chapter analyzes and critiques the literature regarding how servant leadership is linked to interpersonal workplace conflict.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social learning theory and social exchange theory support this study's theoretical framework through a servant leadership perspective. Servant leadership was first presented by Robert Greenleaf in the early 1970s as a theory that influences followers through service, selflessness, and genuine concern for others (Greenleaf, 2016). The desire to meet others' needs and nurture and care for them through altruistic service is the highest priority of the servant leader (van Dierendonck, 2011). This selfless act and motivation to meet others' needs develops within the leader through a lifelong process of life events that shape the character and the innate essence of the leader (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) asserted that eight core characteristics of servant leaders are "standing back, forgiveness, courage, empowerment, accountability, authenticity, humility and stewardship" (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011, pp. 251-252). The role modeling of these behaviors results in followers who are empowered, which encourages them to learn and reciprocate the behavior in a way that reflects



respect, trust, and loyalty towards the leader (Greenleaf, 2016). As employees learn servant leadership behaviors by observing their supervisors, social learning theory posits that they are transformed into servant leaders themselves with others-oriented mindsets and behaviors (Bandura, 1977; Eva et al., 2019). This in turn, causes the follower to engage in reciprocal behavior, as posited by social exchange theory through Gouldner's (1960) norm of reciprocation, which causes followers to return the kind behavior as a form of moral repayment.

### ***Social Learning Theory***

Bandura (1977) proposed that human behaviors are learned by direct personal experience or by observation. Learning through personal experience involves reinforcement of behaviors as a direct response to consequences that either strengthen or weaken the behavior (Bandura, 1977). For example, when individuals experience positive outcomes following a specific behavior, differential reinforcement occurs that promotes the selection of the effective behavior, resulting in its repetition, while ineffective behaviors are abandoned (Bandura, 1977). Learning by observation is accomplished as individuals see modeling of new behavior by others and use it as a guide for their own future actions. Observational learning is governed by four behavioral modeling processes: attentional, retention, reproduction, and motivational (Bandura, 1977). Attentional processes require that an individual accurately perceives and attends to the important aspects of the modeled behavior and replicate it. Retention processes involve remembering the observed behavior both visually and verbally. Reproduction processes refer to acting out the observed/ modeled behavior and transferring the learned behavior from mental knowledge to the equivalent action. Motivational processes suggest that modeled behaviors are more likely to be emulated if they result in outcomes that individuals value (Bandura, 1977).

A major component of the four behavioral modeling processes that results in observational learning is frequency of association; in other words, the role model with whom an individual regularly interacts with and learns from will determine the “types of behavior that will be repeatedly observed and learned most thoroughly” (Bandura, 1977, p. 24). This is of great importance to this study because it explains how through role modeling effective behaviors, servant leaders can change and improve follower behavior through frequent interaction. Furthermore, in modeling selfless behaviors when dealing with conflict that results in successful conflict resolution, employees will learn and emulate these behaviors, as individuals are “more likely to adopt modeled behavior if it results in outcomes they value” (Bandura, 1977, p. 28).

Empirical research on servant leadership has drawn from social learning theory to establish the mechanisms by which servant leaders influence follower behaviors. Role modeling servant leadership behaviors of service and knowledge-sharing leads to increased performance, engagement, and commitment as followers are transformed when they learn and enact servant leadership behaviors (Hunter et al., 2013; Liden et al., 2014; Schwarz et al., 2016; Song et al., 2015). As servant leaders emphasize, through their actions, the importance of selflessly serving others, it encourages and motivates followers to put others’ needs above their own as well (Liden et al., 2014; Schwarz et al., 2016). Furthermore, by modeling desirable servant leadership qualities of helping others and sharing information, servant leaders create a culture of service and empowerment that encourages and promotes helping behaviors amongst followers (Hunter et al., 2013; Song et al., 2015). While social learning theory provides an important base for the long-term transformation of followers through the direct experiential observation of leader servant leadership behaviors, scholars have also used social exchange theory to explain the reciprocation of benefits between leaders and followers in the short-term (Eva et al., 2019).

### *Social Exchange Theory*

The second theoretical framework of this study is social exchange theory, specifically as it relates to Gouldner's (1960) norm of reciprocity. Proposed in the mid-1900s, Sociologist George C. Homans posited that the social interaction between two people involves behavioral transactions of rewards or punishment that are exchanged within the relationship (McRay, 2015). Gouldner (1960) expounded on this theory to include reciprocity, which is the moral obligation to return a benefit, without doing harm in return that is done out of personal obligation or gratitude, based on mutual trust. The expectation to reciprocate favors brings stability to social systems through the behavioral transactions of individuals who are indebted to each other (Gouldner, 1960). Emerson (1976) furthered this theory and proposed that productive exchange, which he calls "reinforcement," happens at the macro-level within large exchange networks that establish the norms of the exchanges and, "takes the movement of valued things (resources) through social process as its focus" (p. 359). In reference to the social exchange of valued resources within large exchange networks, Pattnaik (2018) discussed social exchange theory as a psychological contract that is formed within the employment relationship as new employees are socialized into the system through contract makers (leaders) as they communicate reciprocal obligations to employees. The significance of this theory for this study is the leader-employee relationship will be stabilized as each party regulates their behavior as a means of repayment. This can be in the form of positive behaviors to repay a favor or negative behaviors to bring stability to the perceived moral injustice of not returning a benefit.

Servant leadership research studies have predominately drawn from social exchange theory to explain how servant leaders enhance and transform followers' behaviors (Eva et al., 2019). Based on the norm of reciprocity, servant leaders selflessly serve followers and genuinely

help them develop and succeed, strong leader-member relationships are created based on trust that form strong personal bonds (Ling et al., 2017; Newman, Schwarz et al., 2017). These high-quality trusting relationships result in increased commitment, satisfaction, and motivation which creates a feeling of obligation among followers to reciprocate the leader's positive behaviors (Chan & Mak, 2014; Ling et al., 2017; Newman, Neesham et al., 2017). A key mediating reason why servant leadership results in high-quality leader-employee relationships, from a social exchange perspective is trust (Chan & Mak, 2014; Newman, Schwarz et al., 2017; Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010). When servant leaders place followers' needs above those of the organization, practice fairness, distributive justice, and responsible morality, a covenantal relationship is formed, marked by mutual trust that encourages followers to reciprocate the behavior voluntarily out of gratitude for the leader rather than obligation (Chan & Mak, 2014; Newman, Schwarz et al., 2017; Schwepker, 2016; Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010).

### **Organizational Conflict**

A growing interest in the study of organizational conflict has steadily increased in the last 50 years (Caputo et al., 2019; Deutsch, 1973; Thomas & Schmidt, 1976). Scholars have realized that conflict is not only essential to an organization's existence, it is the essence of it (Pondy, 1992). This is because as individuals come together to carry out common tasks, they form interdependent relationships that increases the chances of minor disagreements that can lead to major interpersonal conflict (Deutsch, 1973; Garner & Poole, 2013; Spector & Jex, 1998). Scholars agree that dealing with conflict in the workplace is inevitable, time-consuming, and costly if managed ineffectively (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). As a result of the amount of time leaders spend in dealing with conflict, researchers have focused on understanding its source,

nature, outcomes, management, and resolution (Caputo et al., 2019; Jehn, 1997; Thomas & Schmidt, 1976).

Seminal works of organizational conflict were first introduced by Blake and Mouton (1964) who declared that “every manager carries on his own shoulders responsibility for solving human problems associated with achieving maximum results through the productive utilization of people. The question is, how can this be best accomplished?” (p. ix). Through their development of the managerial grid, the authors provided the social sciences the first conceptual framework for handling interpersonal conflict. This framework was later tested and reexamined by Thomas and Kilmann (1978) who confirmed the need for managers to handle conflict effectively and spear-headed the quest to better understand interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Consequently, researchers undertook the challenge of extending the literature on conflict by seeking to define and distinguish its typology to better understand how leaders can manage and resolve it effectively.

The most comprehensive definition of interpersonal conflict was proposed by Barki and Hartwick (2004) as a “dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with attainment of their goals” (p. 234). Scholars have agreed on three important aspects of this definition that encompass interpersonal conflict: perception, differences among individuals, and negative emotions. Budd et al. (2020) affirmed in his definition of conflict that the apparent differences can be either real or imagined and Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2013) asserted that the expression of frustration among individuals can be subtle or overt as a result of unfulfilled goals. Scholars have been able to address the sources of conflict by understanding the literature that conceptualizes workplace conflict (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). This understanding identifies

conflict as an individual's perception of another's disruptive actions that hinder the attainment of their goals, resulting in negative emotions (Budd et al., 2020; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). By accurately assessing the source of interpersonal conflict, researchers are better able to understand how to manage and resolve it effectively to minimize its negative outcomes.

### *Sources of Conflict*

Two main sources of interpersonal conflict have been identified by scholars: a leadership failure and a result of differences when individuals interact. When leaders fail to effectively address counterproductive workplace behavior and do not consistently enforce policies and procedures, it causes a series of events that lead to increased workplace conflict (Deutsch, 1973; O'Sullivan, 2017). Failing to intervene and provide support for employees leads to unmet human needs that increases stress in the workplace; this results in emotional exhaustion that increases conflict among employees (Jaramillo et al., 2011; O'Sullivan, 2017). Cropanzano and Barron (1991) contended that when individuals see injustice or perceived unfairness, they engage in interpersonal conflict to restore justice. This finding shows the importance of leaders to effectively address conflict in the workplace, as employees may blame the organization for unresolved conflict causing them to engage in retaliatory behavior (Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006).

Strain in the supervisor-employee relationship is a major source of interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Bruk-Lee and Spector (2006) found that as a result of conflict with a supervisor, employees reported higher levels of negative emotions which increased their counterproductive behaviors at work. Syed and Zia (2013) agreed that barriers in effective communication with one's supervisor and disagreement in rules or difference in values led to interpersonal workplace conflict that greatly impacted organizational performance. These findings reveal that leaders are essential to creating a harmonious environment in the workplace.

Through a leader's modeling of appropriate behavior, strengthening their relationships with their subordinates and mediating differences among employees in an effective manner, leaders can be a source of peace in conflict stemming from differences between employees.

The second major source of conflict in the workplace stems from disagreements among employees. Budd et al. (2020) proposed a multidimensional framework of the sources of conflict that included three dimensions: structural, cognitive, and psychogenic. The researchers contended that self-interested and antagonistic exchanges among interdependent parties influence individuals' perceptions and emotions which influence how they react to one another (Budd et al., 2020). This is due to increased incompatibility and disagreement that arise as a result of the increased interaction among employees (Garner & Poole, 2013; Jehn, 1995). Consequently, if individuals feel threatened during their exchange with other employees, they will become more rigid and less likely to behave in collaborative ways to bring the conflict to a resolution (de Wit et al., 2012). Leaders are therefore responsible for the creation and upholding of practices that allow for cooperative work environments whereby employees work issues out in an effective and productive way. If supervisors lead employees effectively, model, and enforce appropriate behaviors and establish trusting relationships with their employees, organizations can mitigate the consequences of conflict that encompass the various types of interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

### ***Interpersonal Conflict Types***

Original works in organizational conflict have distinguished two types of interpersonal conflict: task and relationship conflict (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Jehn, 1995; Pinkley, 1990; Spector & Jex, 1998). In developing a typology of conflict, Pinkley (1990) discovered that individuals experience, perceive, and differentiate conflict between relationship and task and

emotional versus intellectual dimensions. When individuals attribute conflict to relationship issues, there is an effective response that involves feelings of jealousy, hatred, anger, and frustration, while the task or intellectual dimension did not elicit such responses (Pinkley, 1990). Jehn (1995) furthered the typology of conflict by categorizing and defining relationship conflict as interpersonal differences among individuals that include tension, animosity, and annoyance, and task conflict as being focused on disagreements over the content of the job or project.

Later research identified a third type of conflict within the interpersonal framework that differentiates conflict in how tasks are done: process conflict (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Behfar et al., 2011; DeChurch et al., 2013; Jehn, 1997). Jehn (1997) first conceptualized process conflict as “conflict about how task accomplishment should proceed in the work unit, who’s responsible for what, and how things should be delegated” (p. 540). This latter category has not received much attention within the literature (Behfar et al., 2011), but is nevertheless as important as the other types of conflict due to the negative emotionality associated with all three types as well as their interrelations (Jehn, 1997). Whether individuals experience task, relational or process conflict, one type of conflict can turn into other types if it is not effectively addressed by managers.

As a result of the negative consequences of interpersonal conflict, the interrelation and escalation of conflict types has been a topic of great interest among scholars. High emotionality and low trust have been found to transform task conflict into the more negative form of relational conflict (Jehn, 1997; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Yang & Mossholder, 2004). When individuals display high levels of emotional responses (i.e., anger, defensiveness, blaming, etc.) during disagreements over task issues, their ability to self-regulate diminishes causing the problem to escalate, negatively affecting their relationship (Curseu et al., 2012; Jehn, 1997). Conversely, when relationship conflict arises, task conflict is perpetuated as individuals focus more on each



other and restoring balance than working on the task itself (Jehn, 1997). This problem is further exasperated under conditions of low trust, or if trust has been broken, as individuals are more likely to question or misattribute the other person's intentions causing task conflict to escalate into relationship conflict (Simons & Peterson, 2000). Conflict is then reproduced and magnified through bystanders who communicate the conflict in a biased way to others in the organization (Lee et al., 2014). The interrelation and escalation of unresolved conflict types over time reveals the need for managers to ensure trusting relationships are established among their teams. It is leaders' responsibility to ensure that employees are able to effectively control their emotions so that the negative effects of interpersonal conflict are moderated and do not result in stressful outcomes for employees and financial consequences for the organization (Jimmieson et al., 2017).

### ***Interpersonal Conflict Outcomes***

Scholars have categorized interpersonal conflict as a social stressor in the workplace that creates detrimental stress for employees resulting in a variety of negative outcomes (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). As a result of exposure to this social stressor, scholars have found that individuals experience a higher degree of psychological, behavioral, and physical strains (Bruk-Lee et al., 2013; Spector & Jex, 1998). Interpersonal conflict increases negative emotions, anxiety, frustration, depression, and increased risk of cardiovascular disease (Bruk-Lee et al., 2013; Spector & Jex, 1998; Stoetzer et al., 2009). Furthermore, workplace conflict has been found to decrease trust, respect, and group cohesion, which in turn decreases employee satisfaction (Jehn et al., 2008). When employees are less satisfied because of interpersonal conflict, their organizational commitment decreases (Kurniawan et al., 2018) which also negatively impacts their performance (Behfar et al., 2011; Garner & Poole, 2013; Jehn, 1997).

These behavioral strains can also be manifested in physical outcomes that directly affect organizations.

Stress-related conflict and the associated negative behaviors can adversely impact employees and their organizations. A recent study found that 87% of employees reported being stressed in the workplace, of which 75% reported a change in attitude such as lack of concentration, motivation, and inadequate communication resulting in 56% employees taking unplanned leave (Sardana, 2018). This finding is supported by Liu (2015) who found that interpersonal conflict was directly related to withdrawal behaviors that are costly to organizations: absence and lateness. Experiencing high levels of stress due to interpersonal conflict over time causes job burnout which increases sick leave rates as well as turnover intentions (Dijkstra et al., 2012; Jimmieson, 2017). However, if employees decide to stay at work, another form of strain caused by interpersonal conflict shows up in the workplace as counterproductive work behaviors (Kisamore et al., 2010). These behaviors can range from minor disagreements, to workplace incivility and full-blown abusive behaviors such as workplace bullying (Kisamore et al., 2010; Leon-Perez et al., 2015; Torkelson et al., 2016). While there is no doubt among scholars that high levels of interpersonal conflict result in overall negative consequences for employees and organizations alike, there are still mixed results regarding the threshold that results in detrimental consequences.

Debate over which type of conflict is associated with negative outcomes is ongoing among scholars. While there is agreement that relationship and process conflict have negative individual and organizational outcomes, researchers are not in full agreement regarding the consequences of task conflict. There is an abundance of evidence confirming that relationship conflict is negatively related to performance, satisfaction, and commitment (De Dreu &

Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn, 1995) and positively associated to poor health, burnout, and turnover intentions (De Dreu et al., 2004; Leon-Perez et al., 2016; Medina et al., 2005). The same is true for process conflict, as relationship conflict negatively affects motivation resulting in rigidity and biased communication which impacts the exchange of important information processing (De Wit et al., 2013; Humphrey et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, scholars have suggested that task conflict may not always result in negative outcomes. Several researchers have contended that moderate levels of task conflict can increase participation, creativity, and decision quality (Amason, 1996; Garner & Poole, 2013; Jung & Lee, 2015); while others have argued that task conflict is not negatively related to turnover intentions, affective reactions or performance (De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn, 1995; Medina et al., 2005). This optimistic, functional view of task conflict stems from the view that moderate levels of task-related conflicts at a specific time enhances performance (Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Mannix, 2001) because it activates a relational self that seeks to work things out with others thereby enhancing trust, respect, and cohesion during open discussion forums (Jehn et al., 2008; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Jung & Lee, 2015). However, studies on organizational conflict continue to strongly support that all three types of interpersonal conflict are equally disruptive and that the consequences far outweigh the positive (Bruk-Lee et al., 2013; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). This is because irrespective of the type of conflict, all three are highly interrelated and the escalation of task to relationship conflict increases significantly over time (Jimmieson et al., 2017; Medina et al., 2005). As evidenced by the literature, task conflicts are not always advantageous. This is due to the emotional disruptions that are created as proximity and continued interactions increase over time (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995). A key moderator in the interrelationships between task, process and relationship conflict that mitigates the negative impact of interpersonal

conflict is trust (Simons & Peterson, 2000). Trust between coworkers and with one's supervisor can help lessen the negative outcomes of interpersonal conflict, as individuals give each other the benefit of doubt when trying to resolve and manage conflict in a collaborative way.

### ***Leader Role in Reducing Organizational Conflict***

Decreasing stress caused by interpersonal conflict in the workplace has been a major topic of interest among researchers since 2005 (Caputo et al., 2019). Conflict management has been described as a coping mechanism that restrains the negative aspects of conflict while enhancing a culture of strong employee relations that includes fairness, trust, and mutual respect (De Dreu et al., 2004; "Managing Workplace Conflict," 2020; Virani, 2015). Scholars have agreed that when conflict is managed competently, it increases the quality of relationships because individuals feel listened to, are treated fairly and given the opportunity to voice their concerns (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013; Virani, 2015). In opposition to the benefits of managing conflict constructively, research has found that ineffective conflict management has negative long-term consequences that can affect individual health and wellbeing through increased feelings of burnout (De Dreu et al., 2004). Therefore, it is of utmost importance for organizations to create and nurture a culture of effective conflict management among employees.

**Conflict Management.** Leaders are the key to creating organizational cultures that can effectively manage conflict. Brubaker et al. (2014) emphasized that the success of conflict management in organizations depends on leaders becoming effective conflict mediators. Leader behaviors have been shown to have significant impact on organizational culture. Gelfand et al. (2012) contended that by role modeling appropriate and normative behaviors, leaders create and promote effective conflict management organizational cultures. Specifically, leaders can guide followers toward productive conflict management, while minimizing the effects of dysfunctional,

emotional conflict by helping them reduce negative emotional responses and destructive behavioral manifestations (Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2006). When employees perceive their supervisors as displaying constructive conflict management behavior, it suppresses conflict-induced stress that can have a damaging effect on the overall functioning of the organization (Romer et al., 2012).

Organizations can gain the benefits of increased employee well-being and job performance when leaders utilize effective conflict management skills. Dijkstra et al. (2011) and Romer et al. (2012) affirmed that when leaders employ problem solving strategies in conflict management, it can reduce psychological strain, relationship conflict, and increase employee well-being. This is due to an increased sense of control that the individual experiences over their situation when a leader shows interest in the employee's viewpoint by asking questions (Romer et al., 2012). Subsequently, the more leaders use integrative behaviors in managing conflict, the less employees experience stress caused by task and relationship conflict (Friedman et al., 2000). Baillien et al. (2014) further supported this finding through their study which revealed that having a high concern for others and displaying problem solving behaviors discouraged bullying behaviors that cause stress in others. This reveals the importance for leaders to learn how to manage conflict well and in a way that genuinely seeks to collaboratively resolve problems among employees.

By reducing stress caused by interpersonal conflict that distracts employees from fulfilling their work, leaders can accomplish great things that further the mission of the organization through increased job performance. Longe's (2015) quantitative correlational study of 250 participants found strong empirical support linking effective conflict management skills with increased organizational performance. Thompson (1991) contended that increased

information exchange and having open communication leads to better performance because of the focus on mutual interests and work-related priorities. Leon-Perez et al. (2016) agreed with these findings and argued that fostering an organizational culture of positive conflict management can improve job performance through increased psychological strength. In other words, as employees experience open discussions of disagreements and effective conflict resolution, their confidence, hope, resilience, and optimism increase resulting in less stress, increased well-being, and overall improved quality of service (Leon-Perez et al., 2016).

**Conflict Resolution.** It has often been said that with great power comes great responsibility. This is true for leaders, as they carry the responsibility of creating organizational cultures that are conducive to effective conflict resolution in a prompt and equitable way (Johnson et al., 2017; Schein, 2010; Virani, 2015). To resolve conflict effectively, leaders are called to act as mediators, helping employees cope with this stressor, and move forward by reconciling differences at the start of the conflict dispute (Dijkstra et al., 2012; Gerzon, 2006; Greer et al., 2008). It is important to note that prompt action is required in managing conflict to prevent it from escalating or evolving into other types of interpersonal conflict (Greer et al., 2008). In their role as mediators, Gerzon (2006) asserted that leaders should promote an integral vision, use systems thinking, be present, ask questions, consciously seek dialogue through increased communication in an effort to bridge differences, and come up with innovative solutions.

Leader behaviors in the process of resolving conflict determines the success of the outcome. DeChurch et al. (2013) proposed that collectivistic behaviors that encourage openness and collaboration allow individuals to work through interpersonal conflict successfully resulting in increased performance. Other behaviors such as reframing, trust-building, self-efficacy, and

communication competence have been associated with effective conflict resolution strategies (Leon-Perez et al., 2016; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Uzun & Ayik, 2016; Virani, 2015).

Specifically, De Dreu et al. (2001) affirmed that managers' pro-social orientation that values others and has a high concern to meeting their needs results in constructive problem solving that produces win-win outcomes. It is important to note that these behaviors have been associated with leaders displaying servant leadership characteristics which may prove to have a mitigating effect on interpersonal workplace conflict.

Several studies have investigated the effect of servant leadership on conflict management strategies and how it impacts conflict resolution in the workplace (Fields, 2018; Jit et al., 2016; Joseph, 2006). Jit et al. (2016) maintained that servant leaders display more humane, persuasive, and participative conflict management styles in resolving conflict that are conducive to collaborative conflict resolution via their empathetic listening and open communication skills. Furthermore, Joseph (2006) confirmed that servant leaders' characteristics of service, vision, and humility lead to a more peaceful approach to resolving interpersonal conflict. Through their inclination towards emotional healing, servant leaders naturally employ helpful conflict management styles of integrating as well as fostering helpful behaviors among their employees when resolving conflict (Fields, 2018). Servant leaders' behaviors promote trust, which is a key moderator in reducing interpersonal conflict (Simons & Peterson, 2000). These characteristics can prove beneficial in how a servant leadership style can predict decreased interpersonal organizational conflict.

### **Servant Leadership**

Robert Greenleaf presented the theory of the servant as a leader in the early 1970s after reading a book which transformed his life as he identified with "Leo," the main character who

was a leader that influenced his companions through his service, nobility and presence (Greenleaf, 1977). Based on this story, Greenleaf suggested that a true leader is driven and motivated to meet others' needs, serve them and place those needs above their own (van Dierendonck, 2011). Since Greenleaf first wrote his essay in 1970, many authors have tried to bring clarity to what servant leadership is in an attempt to dispel any confusion regarding its definition (Eva et al., 2019; Spears, 1996; van Dierendonck, 2011). In one way or another, these scholars have tried to address and expound Greenleaf's (1977) definition of a servant leader:

The Servant-Leader is servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first...The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (p. 27)

While this initial description informed the literature on who is a servant leader and what behaviors and outcomes are associated with this type of leadership, this description was not enough to conduct empirical research (Eva et al., 2019). Therefore, many researchers have attempted to conceptualize servant leadership theory based on its antecedents, behaviors, and outcomes.

### ***Definitions***

One of the first scholars to lay a foundation for servant leadership after Greenleaf's original writings was Graham (1991) who argued that servant leaders shift authority to followers



through establishing community characterized by trust and respect. Graham (1991) contended that servant leaders prioritize followers' needs over those of the leader or the organization. Servant leaders empower followers through listening, empathy, unconditional acceptance, care, and nurture. As servant role models, they provide an example for others to follow through service, caring behavior and sharing of power as expounded by Larry Spears, the previous Executive Director of The Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership (Spears, 1996).

Based on Greenleaf's writing, Spears was one of the first and most influential authors to further clarify the servant leadership model. By emphasizing that true leaders are those who have a deep desire to serve others, Spears (1996) noted that servant leadership embraces empowering followers in a caring and ethical way for the purpose of growing and serving them. He also proposed 10 key characteristics of servant leaders that were used by Laub (1999) to extend the literature and offered that this type of leadership "places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader" (p. 81), which promotes follower development, building communities and allows the leader to authentically share power for the good of the individual and the whole organization.

Patterson (2003) took a different approach in her exposition of servant leadership as an extension of transformational leadership and argued that at the heart of the leader-follower relationship is *agapao* love. This type of moral and selfless love is what drives leaders to place the follower's needs above their own, and it is as a result of viewing the follower from a holistic perspective as a human being with "needs, wants, and desires" (Patterson, 2003, p. 8). In the context of the workplace, servant leaders express selfless love by being genuinely interested in learning the giftings of their followers, focusing on growing them as individuals and lastly using those talents to benefit the organization (Patterson, 2003). Using love as the foundation for what

drives servant leaders, van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) later extended the literature by proposing a conceptual model based on compassionate love. This model, the authors posit, is founded on the premises that compassionate love promotes leader's virtuous attitudes of humility, gratitude, forgiveness, and altruism which engender leader behaviors of empowerment, authenticity, stewardship, and providing direction resulting in the follower's overall wellbeing (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015, p. 120).

After an in-depth systematic review of the literature, influential scholars of servant leadership proposed a new definition:

Servant leadership is an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community. (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114)

This definition encompasses several aspects of Greenleaf's (1977) original conceptualization of servant leadership: the motivation, manifestation, and the channel. First, it addresses the motivation of the leader as stemming from a desire to serve rather than be served (Eva et al., 2019). Second, it explains how this desire is manifested, which is by carefully ensuring that follower's needs are being met first above their own desires (Graham, 1991). Third, it reveals how leaders display servant leadership, which is by having an outward perspective focused on selflessly and lovingly caring about others (Patterson, 2003; Spears, 1996). While this definition is by far the most comprehensive one, it is lacking a final aspect explained by Greenleaf's (1977) "test" of a servant leader as revealed through the follower's growth, well-being and modeling servant leadership to those around them (Spears, 1996). To enhance this definition, a fourth part

would need to be added to include the effects or outcomes on individuals and society that result from key characteristics modeled by servant leaders.

Judeo-Christian writings were foundational to Robert Greenleaf's philosophy of servant leadership (Bradley, 1999). In describing servant leaders as a servant first and a leader second, Greenleaf (1977), is replicating the Bible's command to, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Philippians 2:3-4). Waddell (2006) furthers this teaching with his concept of agapao love (meaning the love of God towards man), humility, and altruism as essential elements to servant leadership (Ball, 2019). This was illustrated by the Christian teaching that Jesus Christ, God in human form, intentionally gave His life so that humanity could be reconciled to God. This has been described as the ultimate sacrifice (i.e., being a servant first). Additionally, Jesus exemplified the servant leadership behaviors of standing back (John 8:10), forgiveness (Mark 11:25), courage (Luke 22:42), empowerment (Luke 10:1; Matthew 29:19-20), accountability (Matthew 18:15-19), authenticity (John 3:21), humility (Luke 14:11) and stewardship (Matthew 15:14-28).

### ***Key Characteristics***

Scholars are not in complete agreement about the characteristics that make up servant leadership; however, there has been a steady increase in servant leadership research since Greenleaf first posed this theory. To understand the traits of servant leaders and provide a sound basis for accurate measurement assessments, scholars have proposed several characteristics of a servant leader. After embarking on an in-depth review of Greenleaf's original essays, Spears (1996) spearheaded this quest by identifying 10 characteristics of a servant leader. Servant leaders displayed good listening skills, showed empathy, helped others heal and be whole, had

awareness, persuasion, conceptualized the future, had foresight, were good stewards, and were committed to the growth of others while building up their community (Spears, 1996). This was the basis for Laub's (1999) organizational leadership assessment that confirmed six key characteristics of a servant leader. He contended that servant leaders value and develop people, build community, and display authentic behavior while providing and sharing leadership (Laub, 1999). Page and Wong (2000) further clarified these characteristics by developing a conceptual framework that divided servant leader traits into four main categories: (1) character-orientation, (2) people-orientation, (3) task-orientation, and (4) process-orientation, all of which address the definition of servant leadership based on Greenleaf's (1977) original writings.

The next phase of scholars expounded on these original attributes to include functional descriptors of servant leader behaviors in business terms. For example, Russell and Stone (2002) developed a model that included accompanying attributes such as vision, pioneering, persuasion, teaching, and delegation which were not in the original characteristics. Sendjaya et al. (2008) added additional traits which focused on authenticity, transformational influence, and collaborative relationships unlike Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) who found organizational stewardship, wisdom, and persuasion to be characteristics of servant leaders but not authenticity or empowerment. Liden et al. (2008) introduced behaving ethically to the list of attributes, while van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) included standing back, forgiveness, courage, and accountability. The differences in characteristics may be a result of the lack of a clear overall accepted definition of servant leadership theory and because of the authors' sincere attempt to provide empirical research on the key aspects of a servant leader based on the direction of their own argument (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011).

Attempts to enhance the literature relating to servant leadership characteristics have also been made from a values and virtues perspective. Russell (2001) contended that the key attributes of servant leaders stem from the leadership values they hold, but Patterson (2003) affirmed they flow out of agapao (selfless and moral) love. While both scholars agree that traits of humility, selflessness, and trust result from the core elements of a leader's values and love, Patterson's (2003) model is more in agreement with Greenleaf's (1977) assertion that the servant leader begins with the desire to serve first. This is because the leadership value-driven approach may inadvertently lead to a desire for power that reflects egotistic pride and authoritarian hierarchy that can damage the servant-follower relationship and in turn, hurt the organization (Wong, 2003).

Based on the literature, the servant leader is a selfless individual who seeks to serve first by putting other's needs above their own because of the life events that has shaped the character and who the individual is at the core (Parris & Peachey, 2013). A servant leader naturally inspires trust and positive reciprocation from followers because their desire is to grow their followers out of genuine concern for them and not because their intent is to convince them through manipulation (van Dierendonck, 2011). This type of relational trust takes time to develop, as it is created because of the leader's lifelong intentional decision of putting others' needs first above their own (Greenleaf, 2016). The increased loyalty, commitment, and engagement that comes from servant leadership results from the follower's willingness and desire to reciprocate their leader's kind behavior out of their own freewill (van Dierendonck, 2011). This reciprocation creates a positive organizational culture where employees feel empowered and engaged because their needs are being met and they, in turn, perform at maximum capacity for their employer, which is unlike any other leadership theory thus far.

### *Differentiating Servant Leadership*

The increased focus on leadership ethics, organizational outcomes, and follower well-being have encouraged scholars to understand servant leadership and how it differs from other well-known theories. Specifically, several researchers have attempted to differentiate servant leadership from transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Eva et al., 2019; Graham, 1991; Stone et al., 2004; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Each of these theories promote specific ethical ideals in leadership. Additionally, each of the three leadership models emphasize integrity, values, and growth. Though similar in their recommendations for the exercise of ethical behavior, each has unique focus and motivation which distinguish them from one another.

While both transformational leadership and servant leadership encourage followers' growth, their focus and motivation are for different ends. Graham (1991) and Stone et al. (2004) contend that the greatest difference between the two theories is that the end goal of a transformational leader is to help develop follower skills so they can meet organizational goals, while servant leaders have a moral component that seeks to develop followers as the end in itself. This is the greatest danger of transformational leadership, which is void of a moral mechanism that provides leader accountability (Graham, 1991) that may give rise to manipulation and narcissism, all for the sake of meeting organizational goals (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leaders seek to grow and develop their followers to meet their needs above their own and the organization's goals. This servant, selfless behavior is what causes servant leaders to have better leader-member relationships over those of transformational leaders (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), which is associated to decreased withdrawal, turnover intentions, and disengagement among followers of servant leaders (Hunter et al., 2013).

Like servant leadership, authentic leadership emphasizes the leader's self-awareness, transparency, and moral perspective in influencing follower behavior, but it differs in the leader's motivation. While authentic leaders value self-awareness, self-regulation, and transparency in their relationships with their subordinates (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), their motivation for doing so comes from personal conviction, self-regulation, and internal moral standards (Van Dierendonck, 2011). In other words, in contrast to the servant leader whose motivation to serve comes from an altruistic, caring motive (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2004), the authentic leader is driven by the "sake" of being authentic (Eva et al., 2019, p. 113). When organizational goals or a follower's needs clash with the ethics of an authentic leader, the internal morals and values take precedence over the follower's needs. While authenticity is a characteristic of servant leadership, selfless service to others is not a characteristic of authentic leadership.

Ethical leadership and servant leadership theories have the most in common, although they differ in the focus of the leader's behavior regarding the follower. In defining ethical leadership, Brown et al. (2005) declared that it is the "demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (p. 120). The researchers further emphasized that the ethical leader not only models the behavior, but reinforces ethical behaviors among followers (Brown et al., 2005). Both Van Dierendonck (2011) and Eva et al. (2019) agreed that ethical leadership focuses more on rules to follow based on how the leader thinks things should be done. In contrast, servant leaders encourage ethical practices, but they do it out of a genuine concern and care for the development and growth of the follower rather than a focus on following appropriate workplace behaviors.

### ***Organizational Culture and Leader Behaviors***

Organizational culture is created, embedded, and transmitted through leader behaviors as they role model and encourage or correct acceptable conduct in the workplace. Schein (2010) explained that leaders create and establish organizational cultures through the communication and modeling of their belief and values. This is done through behaviors such as what the leader rewards, pays attention to, role models, and how they allocate resources, deal with critical incidents, and communicates conflict and inconsistencies (Schein, 2010). In other words, leaders can create an others-oriented culture through their own regulatory focus as they develop and shape followers' behavior (Johnson et al., 2017). Servant leaders can influence an organization's culture in a positive way as they embody the behaviors that focuses on meeting other's needs, which followers can then emulate and model for other individuals in the workplace.

A selfless, service-oriented culture is established when employees learn proper behaviors in the workplace as they interrelate with their supervisors. Werner (2017) agreed that as individuals interact with their environment, they learn, and it causes a permanent change in behavior. Several studies found positive relationships among servant leaders and their influence on organizational culture. For example, Liden et al. (2014) found that servant leaders create a service culture where employees focus on serving others through their role modeling which emphasizes the "norms and expectations for behavior among followers" (p. 1445). Furthermore, a caring organizational environment that is high in trust and morale is created by servant leaders as they exemplify respect for employees and strive to develop them further (Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2014). Through a spirit of service, the others-oriented culture that is created by servant leaders has the potential to build a community of peace that decreases workplace conflict as an organizational environment of corporate social responsibility is enhanced (Sengupta &



Sengupta, 2018). To enhance an organizational culture when conflict is effectively resolved and which allows for peaceful resolutions, leaders must first understand that their employees learn and duplicate the behaviors they see modeled in the workplace.

Servant leaders' compassionate behaviors have been shown to create cohesion and collaboration among employees which model the way for constructive problem-solving in relational conflict. Jit et al. (2017) contended that as servant leaders model empathy and compassion, followers are unified, strive to work things out amicably while creating strong relationships amongst each other. This finding is important as it relates to interpersonal conflict because as employees create trusting relationships, they are more willing to listen to each other, take responsibility for their actions as well as openly discuss issues; all of which are essential for conflict resolution (Leon-Perez et al., 2016; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Uzun & Ayik, 2016). In addition, studies have found that self-awareness, consensus-building, reflection, active listening, empathy, communication, and openness have all been linked to servant leader behaviors which can be conducive to inculcating an others-mindset that seeks to put others' needs above their own (Beck, 2004; Ghosh & Khatri, 2018; Das & Reddy, 2013). As these findings suggest, servant leaders can make a positive difference in the interpersonal relationships of their followers through the modeling of selfless behaviors that stem from an altruistic mindset. As a result, followers under a servant leadership style of management not only benefit from healthy work relationships, but from a sense of empowerment as their superiors share their authority and power with them.

Conflict stemming from a leader's excessive abuse of power and control can be mitigated through the selfless behaviors of servant leaders. Servant leaders primarily exert their power by striving to satisfy employee's needs, which leads to an increased sense of empowerment,

organizational commitment, and work engagement (van Dierendonck et al., 2013; Van Winkle et al., 2014). This is done as servant leaders shift authority to their followers and give them access to resources they would not otherwise have. In turn, followers feel empowered which encourages them to treat others in the same way and share their limited resources (Van Winkle et al., 2014). When employees are given the freedom to share the supervisor's authority and influential power, it creates a sense of belonging and ownership of decisions that engages the workforce and unites them even in the midst of conflict. As a result, organizations benefit not only from an engaged and committed workforce, but from priceless outcomes that come as a result of employees being focused on doing a job well done rather than on the distractions that stem from interpersonal conflict.

Nonprofit, service organizations, in particular, may benefit from reduced conflict due to the nature of a more selfless and others-oriented culture (Ghosh & Khatri, 2018; Liden et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2004). While similar to public and private organizations in some respects, nonprofit organizations often necessitate a leadership style that emphasizes mission over profit, reduced employee compensation, and limited resources, although they are competing for the same leadership talent with public and private organizations (Allen et al., 2018). If servant leadership can be linked to reduced conflict, this may enhance a nonprofit's likelihood of achieving its mission under such constraints.

### ***Outcomes***

In the last 12 years, scholars have shifted from a conceptual analysis of servant leadership to an empirical search of servant leadership outcomes (Eva et al., 2019). Being an others-oriented leadership style, characterized by caring, selfless behaviors, the literature reflects that servant leadership outcomes have a direct positive influence for organizations at the individual,

team, and organizational levels. Specifically, the increase in the literature has shown strong empirical support for the assumptions that leaders using a servant leadership style increase work engagement and commitment (individual level), organizational citizenship behavior (team level), and performance (organizational level; Coetzer et al., 2017). The following section investigates the literature in this area and provides an analysis of the findings linking servant leadership to individual, team and organizational outcomes.

**Individual Outcomes.** Individuals under a servant leadership style benefit from increased well-being resulting from higher satisfaction, better relationships, and work engagement. Coetzer et al. (2017) contended that as servant leaders display authenticity, humility, compassion, accountability, courage, altruism, integrity, and good listening skills, individuals are impacted through increased commitment, satisfaction, creativity, and work-life balance. Chiniara and Bentein (2016) supported this finding and further explain that one of the reasons why followers are more satisfied under a servant leader is because they feel that “their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are being met” (p. 135). When employees experience satisfaction in their relationship with their supervisors and co-workers, they are free to be creative, enhancing their job satisfaction which results in increased commitment to the organization. Consequently, employees will have an increased sense of empowerment that motivates them to exhibit servant leader behaviors themselves, impacting the entire organization.

As employees feel empowered by their servant leader, they become more engaged, which increases their creativity and involvement in their work. Studies have shown that servant leadership behaviors directly result in empowerment of their followers (Stone et al., 2004; Van Winkle et al., 2014) which increases their engagement and commitment to achieve higher

organizational goals (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Yang et al., 2017). This may be due to employees feeling valued and trusted as they are empowered to do their work independently (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016). In turn, when individuals feel autonomy in the way they do their jobs, and that their supervisor trusts them to get their work done, they will reciprocate their supervisor's trust and strive to succeed in meeting their goals (Gouldner, 1960; Simons & Peterson, 2000). This puts their focus on the work itself rather than on the interpersonal conflict that can stem from working in teams.

**Team Outcomes.** Team effectiveness may increase under servant leaders through augmented employee cohesion, emotional attachment, and organizational citizenship behaviors. Hunter et al. (2013) asserted that by role modeling service behaviors, leaders can create a service climate that impacts teams as employees emulate helping behaviors with one another. This helping behavior may be attributed to the fact that servant leadership fosters employees' emotional attachment to the organization, increasing commitment, and voice behaviors (Lapoint & Vandenberghe, 2018). When employees are committed and motivated to help one another, a problem-solving mindset leads them to "proactively make suggestions and recommendations to address organizational issues" thereby reducing unhelpful, antisocial behaviors (Lapoint & Vandenberghe, 2018, p. 111). Coetzer et al. (2017) affirmed that as servant leaders treat their employees with authenticity, humility, compassion, and integrity among other behaviors, they create a service climate that brings the group together and enhances organizational citizenship behavior.

Teams flourish under servant leadership because they are more united and have built trusting relationships that encourages them to put the needs of others first. In recent years, scholars have sought to investigate how and why servant leaders foster team cohesion. One study

found that servant leaders inculcate cohesion and collaboration as a result of the strong relationships that are created among followers (Jit et al., 2017). Specifically, as servant leaders put the needs of followers first, even above their own self-interest, their collective performance is enhanced through the high-quality leader-member relationships that are formed (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018). As a result, organizational citizenship behavior increases when followers “develop intense personal bonds marked by shared values, open-ended commitment, mutual trust, and concern for the welfare of the other party” (Newman et al., 2017, p. 58). When servant leaders empower employees and model behavior that is others-focused, they are modeling important relational values to their employees who then exhibit and reciprocate the same behavior with others within their team resulting in greater team effectiveness.

While working in teams has the potential to result in greater turmoil, conflict, and differences of opinions, servant leaders have shown to enhance team effectiveness through a service and others-oriented mindset. Mahembe and Engelbrecht (2014) affirmed that as leaders display servant leadership behaviors of supporting, developing and respecting their employees, team effectiveness and a more respectful, moral, and trusting environment is increased. When employees are in a safe work environment, created by trust in an ethical leader, they are free to effectively work in teams for the common good by serving others in the same way that their leaders behave towards them. Tanno and Banner (2018) argued that servant leaders enhance teamwork as they promote ethical decision-making at all levels of their organization and in this way they are acting as change agents that build community among the employees that allows them to work effectively in teams. When leaders support their employees, hold them accountable, communicate clearly, and values them, they foster the kind of collaboration that promotes and increases team effectiveness (Irving & Longbotham, 2007). In this way, servant

leaders not only influence team effectiveness in a positive way, but they are also able to increase organizational citizenship behavior as employees personally identify with the organization's service climate (Coetzer et al., 2017) and work towards enhancing organizational outcomes that decreases their desire to leave the organization or create conflict for others.

**Organizational Outcomes.** Organizations can benefit from significant positive outcomes that come as a byproduct of leaders who reflect servant leadership behaviors. Recent studies found that servant leadership creates an ethical culture in organizations that increases corporate social responsibility at all levels of the organization (Burton et al., 2017; Sengupta & Sengupta, 2018). As servant leaders foster trust through their authentic and ethical behavior, employees adjust their behavior accordingly because they know their leader will provide justice in whatever the situation may be. This transparency and clarity create an ethical climate that not only helps address conflict quickly, but reduces turnover through increased engagement, commitment, and performance.

Studies have directly linked servant leadership with increased work engagement and performance. Yang et al. (2017) confirmed that as leaders reflect authentic concern for their follower's development by supporting and mentoring them, their engagement in their work increases. When employees are engaged, they are more likely to be committed to the success of the organization (van Dierendonck et al., 2014) which leads to increased employee performance (Coetzer et al., 2017). By putting the needs of the employees first and genuinely helping them to grow and develop, servant leaders can improve organizational outcomes at all levels by engaging their employees in a way that impacts what they do and the strength of their desire to accomplish great things. Arguably, these findings point to a greater organizational benefit that most employers will agree to be an undeniably important factor that keeps their organizations going: a

workforce of engaged, committed, and satisfied employees that is created by implementing a servant leadership culture.

Employee dissatisfaction that results in leaving an organization can be mitigated through an atmosphere of servant leadership. It is often said that individuals join companies but leave managers. Several studies have found that servant leadership behaviors reduce employee turnover intentions and employee dissatisfaction (Coetzer et al., 2017; Hunter et al., 2013; Liden et al., 2014; Terosky & Reitano, 2016). This may be as a result of the leader's genuine concern for the follower's growth and well-being that reduces dissatisfaction and disengagement as followers reciprocate the leader's selfless behavior (Hunter et al., 2013; Terosky & Reitano, 2016). As employees identify with the leader and reciprocate their others-oriented behavior it gives them a sense of purpose that reduces the likelihood of looking for another job (Liden et al., 2014). When employees enjoy and love what they do, and genuinely care for one another in a way that helps further their efforts collectively, they are more effective and less burned out by the demands of their jobs (Coetzer et al., 2017; Liden et al., 2014). These findings are of great importance to this study because when employees are dissatisfied, disengaged, and burned out, it increases the tension that can lead to interpersonal conflict in the workplace. If servant leaders have a positive impact on employee's desire to stay with the company, not only will organizations benefit from an engaged and stable workforce, but from a workforce that is committed to each other and to work issues out in a healthy and amicable way.

### **Summary**

Organizational culture is shaped by leaders as they model behaviors that reinforce beliefs and values that establish norms for the interactions within interpersonal relationships (Johnson et al., 2017; Schein, 2010; Werner, 2017). Interdependent relationships are created when

individuals come together for a common goal and increase the probability of interpersonal conflict that can result in costly outcomes when not managed effectively (Deutsch, 1973; Garner & Poole, 2013; Spector & Jex, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). Leaders with pro-social orientations that build trust, enhance voice behaviors, and who have a high concern to meet other's needs have been associated with effective conflict management skills that resolve conflict successfully (DeChurch et al., 2013; De Dreu et al., 2001; Gelfand et al., 2012; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Uzun & Ayik, 2016). Several studies exploring the effect servant leadership on leaders' conflict management style have confirmed that an inclination towards empathy, service and collaboration, allow servant leaders to enhance and promote integrative conflict resolution strategies in the workplace (Fields, 2018; Jit et al., 2016; Joseph, 2006). While past studies have studied the relationship between servant leadership and conflict management styles (Fields, 2018; Joseph, 2006), little is known about the effect of servant leadership on interpersonal workplace conflict. By exploring how servant leadership behaviors influence organizational interpersonal conflict, practitioners may harness characteristics that are conducive to creating an organizational culture that reduces the effects of this stressor on employee strain, resulting in a more peaceful and productive work environment. Chapter 3 of this study will review the research methodology to include the research design, instruments and data collection and analysis procedures.



### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

The previous chapter provided a review of the literature to date in interpersonal organizational conflict and servant leadership theory. The purpose of this quantitative correlational study was to determine the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. Specifically, the intended goal of this research was to understand if leaders utilizing a servant leadership style reduced interpersonal conflict in the workplace. This chapter discusses the quantitative correlational research design that was used to determine whether servant leadership resulted in lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings. Also discussed are the study's description of final sample, instrumentation, data collection and analysis procedures, validity and reliability, tests of assumptions of the correlation coefficient, researcher role, ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and a summary of the study.

Culture in the workplace is shaped through leaders as they model behaviors that establish an organization's accepted beliefs, norms, and values (Schein, 2010; Werner, 2017). As role models, leaders carry the responsibility of mediating interpersonal conflict among employees that effectively resolves conflict in the workplace (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Jit et al., 2017). When leaders fail to effectively resolve disputes in the workplace or model behaviors that are conducive to a collaborative work environment, organizations incur significant costs. The financial and human costs affecting organizations (e.g. litigation, absenteeism, and turnover) can be traced back to ineffective leadership behaviors that are learned and reciprocated by employees, which creates a contentious organizational culture (Bandura, 1977; Gouldner, 1960; Jimmieson et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2015; McKenzie, 2015; Schein, 2010). While other leadership

styles can lead to increased organizational outcomes, only servant leadership has a moral component that incorporates genuine concern and care regarding followers' needs, growth, and wellbeing (Eva et al., 2019; Graham, 1991; Stone et al., 2004; van Dierendonck, 2011). This moral and selfless element is what drives servant leaders' focus and motivation, which followers learn and reciprocate, thereby enhancing interpersonal relationships, trust, and respect in the workplace (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Graham, 1991; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Specifically, the humane, empathetic, and participative conflict management strategies displayed by servant leaders are conducive to more peaceful and effective approaches in resolving interpersonal workplace conflict (Jit et al., 2016; Joseph, 2006). The strong empirical support of increased servant leadership benefits at an individual, team, and organizational level (Burton et al., 2017; Coetzer et al., 2017; Hunter et al., 2013; Stone et al., 2004) confirm the need to better understand if servant leadership behaviors negatively affects interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

### **Research Design and Method**

This study used a quantitative correlational, nonexperimental approach to test whether servant leadership resulted in lower levels of workplace conflict in nonprofit organizations across the United States. The research design was cross-sectional in nature, resulting in a point in time examination of the data. The quantitative correlational approach was best suited for this study because it examined the nature and direction of the relationship among two variables to predict future outcomes (Locke et al., 2010; Yilmaz, 2013). Mukaka (2012) confirmed that the correlational approach is the most appropriate "statistical method used to assess a possible linear association between two continuous variables" (p. 69). When the correlation coefficient between the two variables is positive, the variables have a direct association (i.e., when one variable increases, the other variable increases as well). In this study, the correlation between the two

variables, servant leadership, and interpersonal organizational conflict was expected to be negative, or inversely related. A negative relationship means that as a leader's levels of servant leadership behavior increase, the levels of interpersonal organizational conflict decreases.

Inferential statistics allow researchers to generalize findings regarding a defined population, based on samples taken to deduce meaning and make conclusions about the data (Dobrovolni & Fuentes, 2008; Salkind, 2017). Quantitative correlational methods are best suited to explain phenomena gathered in large, numerical data that test hypotheses through cause and effect relationships (Muijs, 2016). Complex problems can then be analyzed through variables that are tested, summarized, compared, and generalized (Goertzen, 2017). Nonexperimental methods allow researchers to gather vast amounts of data through electronic survey questionnaires that can be generalized to the population (Goertzen, 2017). Because nonexperimental methods document data from large data sets, findings can be assumed as being representative of the specific population (Goertzen, 2017).

Dobrovolni and Fuentes (2008) maintained that quantitative research is best suited for studies where a hypothesis is developed before collecting data and when the data are used to test if the findings support the assumptions. Through the use of quantitative methods, this study tested various hypotheses regarding the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict (Muijs, 2016). Specifically, hypotheses testing explored the association between servant leadership behaviors and the subscales of interpersonal workplace conflict (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, non-task organizational conflict). The proposed research questions and hypothesis of this study were as follows:

RQ1: What is the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings?

*H1<sub>0</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.

*H1<sub>A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.

*H1<sub>10</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.

*H1<sub>1A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.

*H1<sub>20</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.

*H1<sub>2A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.

*H1<sub>30</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.

*H1<sub>3A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.

*H1<sub>40</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of non-task organizational conflict.

*H1<sub>4A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task non-task organizational conflict.

Quantitative methods also allow researchers to “analyze social reality according to predefined variables and theories to determine the type of data to be collected” (Dobrovolni & Fuentes, 2008, p. 9). To analyze the social reality of social phenomena in the workplace, servant leadership served as the independent variable and interpersonal workplace conflict as the dependent variable. This study investigated the relationships between each subscale of servant leadership (e.g., standing back, forgiveness, courage, empowerment, accountability, authenticity, humility, and stewardship) and each subscale of interpersonal organizational conflict (e.g., task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict), to determine a possible link between constituent parts of each variable. Investigating each relationship helped point to the need for further research focused on the most significant subscale relationships. It also helped highlight specific components of servant leadership which were particularly effective and ineffective in reducing conflict in nonprofit organizations in the United States.

### **Population**

The population studied for this research study were adult employees of nonprofit organizations in the United States. Smith et al. (2004) asserted that servant leaders are preferred for more static and stable environments, which are conducive to the steady growth of followers, and include nonprofit, volunteer, and religious organizations that tend to attract individuals who seek significant opportunities for personal growth. Ghosh and Khatri (2018) agreed that service organizations are conducive to the modeling of servant leadership, where leaders encourage their employees to serve others and put the customers’ needs above their own. Due to the service nature of nonprofit organizations, it is more likely to find leaders who display servant leader behaviors that are others-oriented and selfless (Liden et al., 2014). Therefore, employees in nonprofit organizations who seek meaningful work and opportunities for growth will be able to

evaluate their leaders' behaviors as it relates to servant leadership and report on the levels and frequency of interpersonal conflict they have experienced under that type of leadership.

### **Study Sample**

Thorough sampling techniques are vital to ensure the quality and generalizability of a quantitative study's findings (Delice, 2010). Selecting a sample from a study's population is needed when it is impossible to study the entire population; therefore, unbiased population sampling is required to be able to generalize findings to the whole population that the sample is representing (Muijs, 2016). Probability sampling methods are recommended to ensure the sample being studied is an unbiased representation of the population, which can be used to generalize findings (Kline, 2017; Muijs, 2016). Simple random probability sampling method was used in this study, which ensures unbiased sampling by giving everyone in the population a reasonable chance of being included in the sample and then drawing at random from the population (Kline, 2017; Muijs, 2016).

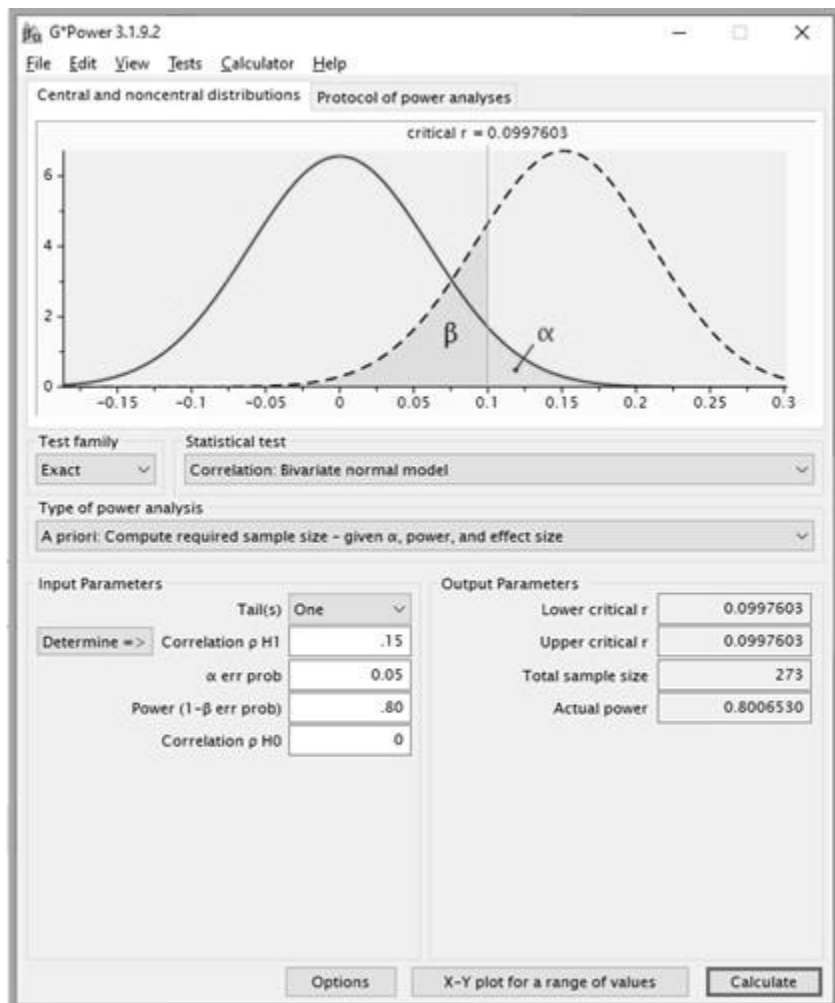
Dobrovolni and Fuentes (2008) contended that quantitative approaches require "large, random samples of people or data that covers a broad spectrum" (p. 10) and recommended a sample of at least 20 to 50 subjects. Field (2013) asserted that because sample size affects the standard error, the larger the sample size, the higher the chance to determine if there is a significant difference between samples and the size of that difference. As a result of disagreements among researchers regarding the correct sample size that accurately represents the population of a study, web-based calculators have been developed by statisticians to help researchers determine the appropriate sample size representative of populations (Adwok, 2015).

A suitable sample size for this study was calculated at a minimum of 273 subjects based on G\*Power version 3.1.92 calculations with the following parameters (see Figure 1): one-tailed

test, expected correlation of .15, alpha equal to .05, and power of .80. Furthermore, to increase the likelihood of successful results, this target number was raised by 20% to 327 participants.

**Figure 1**

*G\*Power*



The target sample were adults 18 years old or older, who had been employed full-time (at least 40 hours weekly) in nonprofit organizations under a supervisor who had been in their role for at least 1 year in the United States. Since it is assumed that leaders are usually full-time, it was expected that those who are employed full-time (18 years old is the typical age individuals begin full-time employment) had a greater likelihood of observing their respective leader's

overall behaviors and could answer more accurately than those who were part-time and could only see a percentage of their leader's behaviors. Random probability sampling was used to select the sample for this study regardless of the individual demographics, organization size, nonprofit type, location within the United States, or type of industry. The web-based questionnaire administration service, SurveyMonkey, was used to create and distribute the survey via a customized hyperlink to a selected panel of participants who had self-identified as working for nonprofit organizations in the United States among 20+ million people who take SurveyMonkey surveys per month (SurveyMonkey, 2020).

### **Instruments**

Quantitative methods require the use of a standardized instrument with preset questions that participants answer to facilitate the statistical analysis of the data (Yimaz, 2013). Each instrument measures the unique variable explicitly using Likert-type scales that determine the level of measurement through questions answered by each participant. Two validated and reliable instruments in survey form were used to investigate the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal organizational conflict. Permissions to use the instruments were obtained from the authors for academic research purposes. The independent variable in this study was servant leadership, and the dependent variable was interpersonal workplace conflict. Servant leadership is defined as an others-oriented style of leadership that prioritizes individuals' needs above their own (Eva et al., 2019). Interpersonal organizational conflict is defined as a "dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with attainment of their goals" (Barki & Hartwick, 2004, p. 234). This quantitative correlational study used the Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale (ICOS) that measures interpersonal workplace conflict (See Appendix A;



Lee, 2007) and the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) that measures servant leadership behaviors (See Appendix B; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

### ***Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale***

Interpersonal workplace conflict was measured using Lee's (2007) Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale (ICOS). This scale is a reliable and valid measure of interpersonal conflict in organizations that was developed as a response to scholars' call for an instrument that assessed the three definitional components of conflict as conceptualized by Barki and Hatwick (2004): disagreement, interference, and negative emotion. Reliability measures the ability of an instrument to give consistent results and is measured by Cronbach's alpha that recommends instrument reliability scores above .7 to be considered reliable (Field, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the ICOS conflict subscales ranged from .91-.93, making this instrument a highly reliable measurement of interpersonal conflict in the workplace (Lee, 2007). Validity measures the accuracy of an instrument and whether it measures what it was designed to measure (Field, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013). Validity correlations were computed for the ICOS through factorial and regression analysis that demonstrated moderate to strong levels of convergent and construct validity, respectively (Lee, 2007).

The ICOS built on earlier instruments and extended previous measurements (ICAWS, Jehn's 1995 Conflict Scales) to include two additional subscales (task process and non-task conflict). The original ICOS instrument measures four types of interpersonal conflict in the workplace which includes a total of 63 questions: task outcome (16 items), task process (16 items), relationship conflict (15 items), non-task organizational conflict (16 items; Lee, 2007). This study used the disagreement subscales for the shortened version of 20 questions: task outcome (5 items), task process (5 items), relationship conflict (5 items), non-task organizational

conflict (5 items; Lee, 2007). Participants responded to 20 items in the ICOS, using a 5-point Likert type scale with responses ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Every Day (See Appendix A).

### *Servant Leadership Survey*

Several instruments have been developed to measure servant leadership in the workplace, but the most widely used and recommended has been the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) developed by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011; Eva et al., 2019), which was further tested and refined to include a shorter version to support cross-cultural equivalence (van Dierendonck et al., 2017). The first study was done in the Netherlands and the U.K. and used eight different samples totaling 1571 participants with a diverse occupational background and the second study was done in eight different countries to include a sample of 5201 participants translated in 8 different languages (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; van Dierendonck et al., 2017). The SLS was thoroughly tested using both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in several countries through four studies and was proven as a reliable and valid tool that measures both the “servant” and “leader” part of servant leadership (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the SLS subscales ranged from .76-.95, confirming the internal consistency of this instrument as a reliable measurement of servant leadership (Field, 2013; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Validity correlations were computed for the SLS through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis that demonstrated good construct, convergent, and criterion-related validity (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

Servant leadership was measured using van Dierendonck and Nuijten’s (2011) original 30-item Servant Leadership Survey (SLS). The reason for choosing the long version of the SLS was because it included three subscales that were vital to determining the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict: accountability, forgiveness, and

courage. The authors removed these three subscales from the shortened version of the SLS to make it culturally relevant in European countries (van Dierendonck et al., 2017). These three subscales were important in determining whether followers were growing, if the leader was ethical and was creating an environment of trust where interpersonal conflict could be managed effectively (Simons & Peterson, 2000; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The SLS measured eight of the core constructs of servant leadership which included standing back (3 items), forgiveness (3 items), courage (2 items), empowerment (7 items), accountability (3 items), authenticity (4 items), humility (5 items) and stewardship (3 items; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Participants were asked to rate how they perceived the leadership behaviors of their direct supervisor by responding to 30 items in the SLS, using a 6-point Likert type scale with responses ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree (See Appendix B).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

This study followed a nonexperimental method that utilized a survey research design (Muijs, 2016). The commercial questionnaire administration service, SurveyMonkey, was used to distribute the electronic survey questionnaire to participants using the Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale (ICOS) that measures four constructs of workplace conflict (See Appendix A; Lee, 2006) and the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) that measures eight core constructs of servant leadership (See Appendix B; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Initial contact with the instrument developers was made via email to request authorization to use the measurement tools for academic purposes. Permission to use the ICOS was granted by Dr. Valentina Bruk-Lee and permission to use the SLS was granted by Dr. Dirk van Dierendonck. The output of the assessments only included the original Likert-scale responses of each anonymized participant.

SurveyMonkey is a paid commercial questionnaire administration service that uses secure technology to collect, store, and measure data from a specific, targeted sample. TLS cryptographic encryption protocols are used by SurveyMonkey to secure all collected data (SurveyMonkey, 2020). SurveyMonkey has volunteer survey participants all over the world who are recruited, selected, and vetted to answer questionnaires and then receive a monetary contribution of .50 cents per question answered donated to a participating charity of their choice (SurveyMonkey, 2020). Informed consent forms, filtering questions, and a total of 50 survey questions for the SLS and ICOS instruments were used to create the questionnaire. Survey Monkey sent an email to those among their database of self-identified nonprofit employees inviting them to participate in the survey. Participants excluded from taking the survey were those who did not indicate consent, those who are not currently working for a nonprofit for at least one year, those indicating that their supervisors have been in their role for at least one year, and those who did not answer all 50 questions. Additionally, all questions were marked as required to avoid any missing data and participants were allowed to end the survey at any time.

A suitable sample size for this study was calculated at a minimum of 273 subjects based on G\*Power version 3.1.92 calculations with the following parameters: one-tailed test, expected correlation of .15, alpha equal to .05, and power of .80. Furthermore, to increase the likelihood of successful results, this target number was raised by 20% to 327 participants. Simple random sampling was used to gather a sample from the population to obtain an unbiased sample (Muijs, 2016). This form of data collection allowed the collection of large amounts of information regarding the two variables while providing flexibility to participants and increase response rates in a random and nonbiased way to allow for generalizability (Muijs, 2016).

## Data Analysis Procedures

To explain phenomena using numerical data, it must be analyzed using mathematically based methods that define the “what” or “how” of an event (Goertzen, 2017; Muijs, 2016). Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze and make sense of the data gathered through a quantitative correlational method of inferential statistics (Muijs, 2016). Once a minimum of 329 completed responses were obtained, Survey Monkey provided a raw SPSS data file that was uploaded into IBM SPSS Statistics v27. The data file was then cleaned to include: renaming variable questions to align them with the correspondent instrument’s subscales, adjusting settings for the variables from nominal to ordinal, removing excluded participants based on filter questions and question completion, recoding the SLS-Forgiveness subscale into different variables (reassigned the values in reverse order), and computing variable subtotals for each subscale using the sum statistical formula in SPSS.

To analyze the data, descriptive and inferential statistics were calculated. First, descriptive statistics were calculated using frequency distribution for participant demographics of age and gender and for all SLS and ICOS subscales. Means, standard deviations, and percentages were calculated and coded within SPSS from numerical data obtained from participant responses. Second, inferential statistics were calculated for each instrument and subscales using the correlational coefficient, Spearman’s rank-order correlation ( $r_s$ ). Data were analyzed to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship between independent and dependent variables and determine how strong that relationship was (Muijs, 2016; Mukaka, 2012).

The level of significance (preset cut off  $p$ -value) for this study was set at .05, but to ensure that cumulative Type I error remains below .05, the Bonferroni correction method was used. Using this method, alpha (.05) was divided by the number of comparisons (12) to

determine the new level of significance ( $p = .00416667$ ; Field, 2013). It is suggested that if the statistical analysis reveals that the significance level is below the new preset cut-off value ( $0.00416667$ ), then it means the null hypothesis is rejected and that there are differences or effects in the population that are not due to chance; in other words, it means that the relationship is significant (Muijs, 2016). If the significance level is above the new preset cut off-value, then it means that the relationship is not significant and it is due to chance, so the null hypotheses is accepted (Muijs, 2016).

Correlational analysis was conducted using the nonparametric test, Spearman's Rank Order ( $r_s$ ) with levels of significance at  $p < .004$  for each of the subscales of servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict. Spearman's Rank Order ( $r_s$ ) correlation test can be used when the data analyzed meets the following assumption tests: (1) variables are measured on an ordinal, interval, or ratio scale; (2) two variables represent paired observations; and (3) there is a monotonic relationship between the two variables (Laerd Statistics, 2020). The variables in this study were ordinal, as depicted by the ordered nature of the instruments: the SLS had a 6-point Likert scale and the ICOS had a 5-point Likert scale. The two variables represented paired observations; represented by a single participant's perception of their supervisor's leadership style and their perceived level of conflict in the workplace. Finally, the two variables in this study had a monotonic relationship, revealed by the values of interpersonal workplace conflict decreasing as the values of servant leadership increased.

If the correlation coefficient ( $r_s$ ) is a positive number, the researcher can predict that higher levels of the independent variable will result in higher levels of the dependent variables. If the correlation coefficient is a negative number, the researcher can predict that higher levels of the independent variable will result in lower levels of the dependent variable. In addition, by

analyzing the effect size, the strength of the relationships of the variables could be determined to understand how much impact the independent variable had on the dependent variables (Muijs, 2016). If the effect size is closer to .00, then it meant that the strength of the relationship was weak, whereas if it is closer to 1.00, then it meant that the strength of the relationship between the two variables was strong (Muijs, 2016). This type of analysis helped in making predictions about the relationship between the variables, determine the direction and strength of the relationship, and allowed for generalizations that can point to conclusions regarding the target population with greater certainty (Salkind, 2017).

### **Description of Final Sample**

Four hundred sixty-four people responded to Survey Monkey's invitation e-mail by clicking on the hyperlink to participate in the study. Of the 464 who began the survey, 438 consented to participate in the study. The first two questions of the survey served to ensure respondents have worked for a nonprofit for at least one year and worked under supervisors who have been in their capacity for at least one year. Of the 464 consenting participants, 374 were 18 years of age and older, indicating they were both currently working for a nonprofit for at least one year and their supervisor had been in their capacity for at least one year. Of the 374 qualified participants, 329 answered all questions. The response rate of those who clicked on the link to participate in the survey ( $n = 464$ ) to those who fit the inclusion criteria and answered all questions ( $n = 329$ ) was 71%. The total number of responses ( $n = 329$ ) meets the desired sample size for this study ( $n = 327$ ), calculated using G\*Power at a minimum of 273 subjects multiplied by 20% to increase the likelihood of successful results.

Demographic questions for this study included age and gender. Participants were well-distributed across all age groups. The age groups most represented were 30-44 years (34%) and

45-60 years (28%), while 19% were between 18 and 29 years and 19% over 60 years.

Furthermore, 77% of participants were female ( $n = 252$ ), while 23% were male ( $n = 75$ ).

### **Researcher Role**

The researcher's role in this investigation was to represent the reality of this study's quantitative findings objectively, which was grounded on a post-positivist worldview concerning data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the results. Quantitative methods endorse the belief that social phenomena should be studied objectively and independently of the researcher's reality or influence (Yilmaz, 2013). The post-positivist worldview holds there is an objective reality in the world that can be studied and discovered through the natural sciences while acknowledging the researcher's subjectivity shapes and influences that reality (Muijs, 2016). Therefore, since research findings can never be certain, the post-positivist perspective focuses on representing reality as best as possible through levels of confidence and predictability (Muijs, 2016). This worldview shaped the researcher's role as a neutral party to ensure objectivity and impartiality during the research and analysis process (Yilmaz, 2013). The researcher examined human behavior according to patterns derived from numerical data that was assigned to each variable and interpreted the statistical findings in the discussion section of this study (Dobrovolni & Fuentes, 2008; Yilmaz, 2013). The researcher did not have any direct contact or personal relationship with the participants of this study.

To ensure objectivity, Dobrovolni and Fuentes (2008) posited that quantitative methods require researchers to separate and detach themselves from the subjects, randomly select samples that are as large as possible, describe behaviors with numbers, analyze social reality according to predefined variables, and use theories and statistical methods to analyze data and interpret findings. This study followed these recommendations through the use of an online survey service



that randomly collected and selected data from nonprofit organizations in the United States, thereby separating the contact between researcher and subjects. Once participant responses were received, numerical data were assigned to predefined variables that was imported and analyzed through statistical methods utilizing SPSS software. Analysis procedures were based on pre-identified theories that were used as the basis to interpret this study's findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was submitted to the Abilene Christian University (ACU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection until full ACU-IRB approval (See Appendix C). Ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice were followed for all human subjects. Once IRB approval was received, data were collected through random sampling of participants. Privacy and confidentiality was ensured by not associating survey responses to participants or disclosing their names or identities; this also ensured minimal risks, and no harm done to participants. The survey process began by providing subjects with an informed consent form that was signed electronically and included information regarding the purpose of the research and confidentiality procedures to ensure anonymity and protection of participant identities and responses. Participants were required to click on "I agree," or "I do not agree," to indicate their consent or nonconsent. Participants were required to electronically consent to continue the survey. Consent forms were provided for download so participants could retain a copy for their records. Confidentiality statements, consent statements, data collection requirements, and criteria for exclusion were also included. Survey completion was voluntary, and participants were asked to contribute their responses without coercion or undue influence. They were also be informed of any potential risks involved in participating in the study. Furthermore, subjects were notified they could withdraw from participating in the study at any time without consequences.

Ethical considerations for the researcher start with honesty, trust, and respect for all human subjects. Protecting an individual's anonymity, rights, and maintaining integrity are of utmost importance in carrying out the research process (Dobrovolny & Fuentes, 2008). Toward this end, the research values and ethics that guided this research were: (a) rigorous adherence to quantitative procedures; (b) maintaining impartiality and detachment from participants; (c) ensuring transparent, objective and careful analysis of the data; (d) accurately representing findings without overstating them; and (e) full disclosure of methodological process (Duffy & Chenail, 2008). Data were collected through a secure online service and analyzed by the researcher through SPSS software. Clear and factual reporting of results were followed, as well as fully disclosing and explaining errors. Only the researcher had access to data and received no personal gains from conducting the research. All data were collected, accessed, and stored securely in an encrypted file in the researcher's password-protected computer and per IRB privacy protocols. Participant responses will be destroyed after the study is published.

### **Assumptions**

Quantitative methods assume that an objective reality exists, it is relatively constant, and it can be observed and measured (Dobrovolny & Fuentes, 2008). The primary assumption of this study was grounded on social learning and social exchange theory, which states that individuals learn from each other and reciprocate behavior to restore justice (Bandura, 1977; Gouldner, 1960). Based on these theories, it was assumed that there is an objective reality between supervisors and their employees that is constant and could be measured (Yilmaz, 2013). Second, this study assumed that the participants the questionnaire were sent to were the same people who answered the survey questions. Furthermore, the researcher assumed the participants were truthful and honest regarding their perception of their supervisor's behaviors, what they have

learned, and actions they had reciprocated to restore justice in their relationships. Steps to ensure participant honesty included safeguarding anonymity and confidentiality of participant responses without fear of retaliation. Finally, the researcher assumed that the instruments used measured what they were intended to measure and they are effective tools in providing valid and reliable data (Yilmaz, 2013).

### **Limitations**

Due to the objective and predetermined nature of quantitative approaches, one limitation of this method is the lack of meaning obtained from participants, as they are not able to provide insight into their feelings or experiences regarding why they feel or behave in specific ways (Yilmaz, 2013). This study provided quantitative data that revealed a correlation between servant leadership behaviors and levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace at a specific point in time, but it did not explain why and how perceived servant leadership behaviors impact conflict in the workplace. This was because quantitative studies focus on behavior and trends, rather than the motivation or reason behind the actions (Goertzen, 2017).

Another limitation from web-based quantitative studies relates to the lack of socio-economic diversity in the population studied, as specific demographic groups such as disadvantaged individuals may be excluded from participating in the survey (Goertzen, 2017). Because the survey was distributed using an online, web-based software in the United States, only English-speaking individuals with internet access were able to complete the questionnaire, limiting the ability to generalize findings.

A final limitation of this study related to the positivist perspective that reality is constant and objective. Dobrovolni and Fuentes (2008) maintained that in quantitative evaluations, researchers assume that there is an objective reality that participants perceive in a similar,

constant manner. This posed a limitation as the data gathered were the self-reported perceptions of participants regarding their supervisors and workplace environment, which could be different for each person. The inability to verify responses and ask further clarifying questions had the potential to negatively impact the accurate representation of the results.

### **Delimitations**

This study was designed with several boundaries to delimit and control its subjects, focus, and quality of responses. While each of these boundaries had the capacity to affect the nature and quality of the responses, thereby potentially affecting the results, future studies may use these delimitations to extend the current research. First, the sample population was limited to English-speaking employees in the United States that had been employed for at least one year. This ensured the participants had an established, stable relationship with individuals from their organization at the time of survey completion. Not including those who have been employed for at least one year could have potentially affected the results in that the study was not able to include the observations and insights gleaned from the initial on-boarding, training, and the employees' first year of development. Second, only employees who self-reported as working for nonprofit organizations were asked to complete the survey; this kept the focus of this study on organizations that are more conducive to a servant leadership culture. Not including employees outside of nonprofit organizations limited the results to only nonprofit organizational cultures and eliminated the opportunity to compare nonprofit workers with for-profit employees amongst all U.S. workers. Third, subjects were limited to those who work for leaders that have been in a supervisory role for at least one year; these criteria ensured the supervisors being evaluated were established leaders, whom employees knew well to increase the quality of responses obtained. However, this prevented the opportunity to incorporate the initial leadership decisions and

behaviors which may have been significant in terms of how they impacted workplace conflict in the long-term.

### **Summary**

This chapter discussed the research methods that were utilized to investigate the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. Research has demonstrated that static environments such as those in nonprofit organizations are more conducive to servant leadership behaviors (Smith et al., 2004) and has shown that quantitative studies are best to study phenomena that can be generalized to large populations (Goertzen, 2017). Therefore, a quantitative correlational analysis was used to explore the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizations across the United States. Simple random probability sampling was used to gather at 329 completed participant responses to ensure unbiased sampling methods that allowed for generalizability of the findings to the larger population of nonprofit employees in the United States. A nonexperimental survey design was used to collect data via an electronic questionnaire through the web-based service, SurveyMonkey. Two valid and reliable standardized instruments were used to determine employee's perceptions of their supervisor's servant leadership behaviors and level of interpersonal conflict in their workplace. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) measured supervisors' servant leader behaviors, and the shortened version of Lee's (2007) Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale measured the level of interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Data were analyzed through inferential statistics using SPSS, which determined if there was a statistically significant relationship between servant leader behaviors in supervisors and the level of interpersonal conflict in the workplace as

experienced by employees in nonprofit organizations. These results helped in determining the relationship between servant leadership behaviors and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. The following chapter will provide a detailed discussion of the results of the study.

## Chapter 4: Results

This quantitative correlational study explored the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. Specifically, the purpose of this research was to understand if leaders utilizing a servant leadership style reduce interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Two instruments were used in a correlational design to determine whether employees were less likely to experience interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizations in which servant leadership is practiced. This research study was guided by the following research question and hypotheses statements:

RQ1: What is the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings?

*H<sub>10</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.

*H<sub>1A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.

*H<sub>10</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.

*H<sub>1A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.

*H<sub>20</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.

*H1<sub>2A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.

*H1<sub>30</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.

*H1<sub>3A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.

*H1<sub>40</sub>*: There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of non-task organizational conflict.

*H1<sub>4A</sub>*: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task non-task organizational conflict.

This chapter presents the results in four sections beginning with data collection and analysis procedures. Next, a description of the final sample is discussed using descriptive statistics to analyze sample demographics, response rate and sample size. Third, reliability and internal consistency of the instruments are presented using Cronbach's alpha, mean, and standard deviation. Fourth, correlational findings and hypothesis test results are presented. Finally, a summary of the chapter is presented.

### **Reliability and Descriptive Statistics**

This quantitative correlational study used the Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale (ICOS) to measure interpersonal workplace conflict (See Appendix A; Lee, 2007) and the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) to measure servant leadership behaviors (See Appendix B; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) and determine the nature and strength of the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha were calculated for each subscale of servant leadership and interpersonal



workplace conflict as shown in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha provides a measurement of reliability that calculates an instrument's internal consistency by correlating the score of each question with their overall score and comparing it to the variability for all scores (Salkind, 2017). The ability of an instrument to give consistent and reliable results is indicated by Cronbach's alpha scores above .7 (Field, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013). Cronbach's Alpha scores for all SLS and ICOS subscales ranged from .80 to .95, indicating high internal consistency for both instruments as reliable tools that measure servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict. The results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Reliability and Descriptive Statistics*

Subscale	Cronbach's Alpha	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Servant leadership</i>				
Empowerment	.93	329	4.79	1.14
Standing Back	.90	329	4.40	1.42
Accountability	.89	329	5.15	.85
Forgiveness	.91	329	4.42	1.52
Courage	.83	329	3.69	1.31
Authenticity	.83	329	4.31	1.18
Humility	.95	329	4.29	1.35
Stewardship	.80	329	4.83	1.16
<i>Interpersonal Workplace Conflict</i>				
Task Outcome Conflict	.85	329	2.00	.82
Task Process Conflict	.87	329	1.76	.84
Relational Conflict	.90	329	1.45	.79
Non-Task Org Conflict	.89	329	1.46	.81

### *Servant Leadership Subscales*

The first subscale of servant leadership is empowerment. The mean value for empowerment was 4.79 of a 6-point scale ( $SD = 1.14$ ), signifying that participants indicated their supervisors behave in ways that enables them to make decisions, gives them authority, encouragement and provides clear guidance with new opportunities to use and learn new skills. The second subscale of servant leadership is standing back. The mean value for standing back was 4.40 of a 6-point scale ( $SD = 1.42$ ), signifying that participants indicated their supervisors behave in ways that does not chase after recognition, but instead keeps themselves in the background while giving credit to others and enjoys others' success more than their own. The third subscale of servant leadership is accountability. The mean value for accountability was 5.15 of a 6-point scale ( $SD = .85$ ), signifying that participants indicated their supervisors them and others accountable for their job performance and how the work is carried out. The fourth subscale of servant leadership is forgiveness. The mean value for forgiveness was 4.42 of a 6-point scale ( $SD = 1.52$ ), signifying that participants indicated their supervisors behave in ways that is not critical of their mistakes and who do not hold grudges against people who have offended them at work. The fifth subscale of servant leadership is courage. The mean value for courage was 3.69 of a 6-point scale ( $SD = 1.31$ ), signifying that participants slightly disagreed that their supervisors behave in ways that takes risks despite being supported by their own managers. The sixth subscale of servant leadership is authenticity. The mean value for authenticity was 4.31 of a 6-point scale ( $SD = 1.18$ ), signifying that participants indicated their supervisors behave in ways that is transparent about their true feelings, limitations, and weaknesses. The seventh subscale of servant leadership is humility. The mean value for humility was 4.29 of a 6-point scale ( $SD = 1.35$ ), signifying that participants indicated their supervisors

behave in ways that learn from criticism, admit their mistakes, and learn from the different views and opinions of others. The eighth subscale of servant leadership is stewardship. The mean value for stewardship was 4.83 of a 6-point scale ( $SD = 1.16$ ), signifying that participants indicated their supervisors behave in ways that focus on the good of the whole and which emphasizes the societal responsibility of the work at hand.

### ***Interpersonal Workplace Conflict Subscales***

The first subscale of interpersonal workplace conflict is task outcome. The mean value for task outcome was 2.00 of a 5-point scale ( $SD = .82$ ), signifying that participants indicated they seldom experienced disagreements or differences of opinion with coworkers because of a work task, or had any conflict with others over what should be done in a work task. The second subscale of interpersonal workplace conflict is task process. The mean value for task process was 1.76 of a 5-point scale ( $SD = .84$ ), signifying that participants indicated they almost never experienced disagreements, differences of opinion or conflict with others regarding how or when work tasks should be performed. The third subscale of interpersonal workplace conflict is relational conflict. The mean value for relational conflict was 1.45 of a 5-point scale ( $SD = .79$ ), signifying that participants indicated they rarely experienced disagreements, differences of opinion or conflict with others at work because of incongruent personality, personal values, dislike or a lack of personal trust. The fourth subscale of interpersonal workplace conflict is non-task organizational conflict. The mean value for task outcome was 1.46 of a 5-point scale ( $SD = .81$ ), signifying that participants indicated they rarely experienced conflict or disagreements with others as a result of organizational power, company policies, culture or poor organizational leadership.

## Presentation of Findings

A Spearman's rank-order correlation ( $r_s$ ) was run to determine the relationship between supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and the levels of interpersonal workplace conflict of 329 nonprofit employees in the United States. There was a negative correlation between supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and the levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace, which was statistically significant ( $r_s = -.338, p = .001$ ; See Figure 2).

### Figure 2

*SLS and ICOS Total Correlations*

Correlations				
			SLSTOTALS	ICOSTOTALS
Spearman's rho	SLSTOTALS	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.338
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.000
		N	329	329
	ICOSTOTALS	Correlation Coefficient	-.338	1.000
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.
		N	329	329

A Spearman's rank-order correlation ( $r_s$ ) was also conducted to determine the relationship between supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and each of the interpersonal workplace conflict subscales. The results are shown in Table 2 and Figure 3.

**Table 2***Correlational Analysis using Spearman's rho for SLS and ICOS*

Servant Leadership Subscale	Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Subscale			
	Task Outcome	Task Process	Relationship Conflict	NTO Conflict
Empowerment				
Correlation Coefficient	-.279*	-.270*	-.193*	-.313*
Significance	.001	.001	.001	.001
Standing Back				
Correlation Coefficient	-.247*	-.229*	-.154*	-.301*
Significance	.001	.001	.003	.001
Accountability				
Correlation Coefficient	-.146*	-.117	-.170*	-.210*
Significance	.004	.017	.001	.001
Forgiveness				
Correlation Coefficient	-.334*	-.351*	-.298*	-.393*
Significance	.001	.001	.001	.001
Courage				
Correlation Coefficient	.084	.044	.081	.043
Significance	.064	.214	.071	.218
Authenticity				
Correlation Coefficient	-.167*	-.186*	-.094	-.222*
Significance	.001	.001	.044	.001
Humility				
Correlation Coefficient	-.235*	-.264*	-.163*	-.281*
Significance	.001	.001	.002	.001
Stewardship				
Correlation Coefficient	-.266*	-.279*	-.196*	-.315*
Significance	.001	.001	.001	.001

*Note.* All coefficients are significant at  $*p < .004$ , one-tailed.  $n = 329$ . NTO = Non-Task

Organizational Conflict

**Figure 3***Correlation Display Matrix*

Empowerment	1.000														
Standing Back	0.726*	1.000													1.00
Accountability	0.504*	0.400*	1.000												0.80
Forgiveness	0.492*	0.532*	0.223*	1.000											0.60
Courage	0.189*	0.092	0.142	-0.196*	1.000										0.40
Authenticity	0.621*	0.625*	0.369*	0.384*	0.285*	1.000									0.20
Humility	0.734*	0.729*	0.390*	0.529*	0.171*	0.709*	1.000								0.00
Stewardship	0.720*	0.636*	0.494*	0.496*	0.222*	0.657*	0.713*	1.000							-0.20
Task Outcome Conflict	-0.279*	-0.247*	-0.146*	-0.334*	0.084	-0.167*	-0.235*	-0.266*	1.000						-0.40
Task Process Conflict	-0.27*	-0.229*	-0.117	-0.351*	0.044	-0.186*	-0.264*	-0.279*	0.711*	1.000					-0.60
Relationship Conflict	-0.193*	-0.154*	-0.170*	-0.298*	0.081	-0.094	-0.163*	-0.196*	0.593*	0.649*	1.000				-0.80
Non-Task Org Conflict	-0.313*	-0.301*	-0.210*	-0.393*	0.043	-0.222*	-0.281*	-0.315*	0.579*	0.635*	0.641*	1.000			-1.00
	<b>Empowerment</b>	<b>Standing Back</b>	<b>Accountability</b>	<b>Forgiveness</b>	<b>Courage</b>	<b>Authenticity</b>	<b>Humility</b>	<b>Stewardship</b>	<b>Task Outcome Conflict</b>	<b>Task Process Conflict</b>	<b>Relationship Conflict</b>	<b>Non-Task Org Conflict</b>		<b>Correlation Coefficient (Rs)</b>	

Note. All coefficients are significant at  $*p < .004$ .

The correlational analysis showed that empowerment is negatively and significantly correlated with each of the four ICOS subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). Therefore, there is a negative relationship between higher levels of empowerment and lower levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

The correlational analysis showed that standing back is negatively and significantly correlated with each of the four ICOS subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). Therefore, there is a negative relationship between higher levels of standing back and lower levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

The correlational analysis showed that accountability is negatively and significantly correlated with three of the four ICOS subscales (task outcome, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict), but is not significantly correlated with task process conflict. Therefore, there is a negative relationship between higher levels of accountability and lower levels of outcome, relationship and non-task organizational conflict in the workplace, but not with lower levels of task process conflict.

The correlational analysis showed that forgiveness is negatively and significantly correlated with each of the four ICOS subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). Therefore, there is a negative relationship between higher levels of forgiveness and lower levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

The correlational analysis showed that courage has a nonsignificant relationship with each of the four ICOS subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). Therefore, there is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of courage and lower levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

The correlational analysis showed that authenticity is negatively and significantly correlated with three of the four ICOS subscales (task outcome, task process, and non-task organizational conflict), but is not significantly correlated with relationship conflict. Therefore, there is a negative relationship between higher levels of authenticity and lower levels of outcome, process and non-task organizational conflict in the workplace, but not with lower levels of relationship conflict.

The correlational analysis showed that humility is negatively and significantly correlated with each of the four ICOS subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-

task organizational conflict). Therefore, there is a negative relationship between higher levels of humility and lower levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

The correlational analysis showed that stewardship is negatively and significantly correlated with each of the four ICOS subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). Therefore, there is a negative relationship between higher levels of stewardship and lower levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

In summary, empowerment, standing back, accountability, forgiveness, authenticity, humility, and stewardship were negatively and significantly correlated with interpersonal conflict, while courage was nonsignificant. Therefore, the null hypothesis ( $H_10$ ) is rejected. In this study, there is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership behaviors and lower levels of the four subscales of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings (See Figure 4). The research hypothesis test results are summarized in Table 3.

#### Figure 4

##### *Servant Leadership and ICOS Subscales Correlations*

		Correlations					
		SLSTotals	TOCONFLICT	TPCONFLICT	RELCONFLIC T	NTOCONFLI CT	
Spearman's rho	SLSTotals	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.299	-.300	-.209	-.356
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.000	.000
		N	329	329	329	329	329



**Table 3***Summary of the Hypotheses Tested*

Hypothesis	Result	Description
$H1_0$	Rejected	There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings
$H1_A$	Not Rejected	There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.
$H1_{10}$	Rejected	There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.
$H1_{1A}$	Not Rejected	There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task outcome.
$H1_{20}$	Rejected	There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.
$H1_{2A}$	Not Rejected	There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task process.
$H1_{30}$	Rejected	There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.
$H1_{3A}$	Not Rejected	There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of relationship conflict.
$H1_{40}$	Rejected	There is not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of non-task organizational conflict
$H1_{4A}$	Not Rejected	There is a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of task non-task organizational conflict

## Summary

This research explored the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. Data were collected via SurveyMonkey and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics v27. Of the initial 464 participants who began the survey, 329 qualified and answered all questions. The majority of the participants were female (77%) and the age group most represented were 30-44 years of age (34%). Reliability and internal consistency of the two instruments was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, mean, and standard variation. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .80 to .95, indicating high internal consistency reliability. Correlational analysis was conducted using Spearman's Rank Order ( $r_s$ ) with levels of significance at  $p < .004$  for each of the subscales of servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict. There was a negative correlation between supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and the levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace, which was statistically significant ( $r_s = -.338, p = .001$ ).

Correlational analysis revealed that there was an overall statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership behaviors and lower levels of interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings. Therefore, the null hypothesis ( $H_{I0}$ ) was rejected. Findings also revealed that there was not a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of accountability and lower levels of task process; higher levels of courage and all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, non-task organizational conflict), and higher levels of authenticity and lower levels of relationship conflict. Despite these results, correlational analysis revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between servant leadership and all four subscales of interpersonal workplace conflict (SLS/Task Outcome  $r_s = -.299, p = .001$ ; SLS/Task

Process  $r_s = -.300$ ,  $p = .001$ ; SLS/Relationship Conflict  $r_s = -.209$ ,  $p = .001$ ; SLS/NTO Conflict  $r_s = -.356$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The following chapter will provide a detailed interpretation, discussion, and implications of the results of the study and will present limitations and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations**

Ineffective leadership behaviors result in increased interpersonal workplace conflict as employees imitate and reciprocate their leader's poor behaviors (Bandura, 1977; Gouldner, 1960; Jimmieson et al., 2017). As role models, leaders can shape an organization's culture, thereby negatively influencing the entire workplace when they fail to provide support and direction, abuse power, or ineffectively deal with conflict (Jimmieson et al., 2017; O'Sullivan, 2017; Schein, 2010; Torkelson et al., 2016). As a result, organizations are negatively affected due to the financial and human consequences stemming from decreased performance, increased stress, burnout, turnover intentions, absenteeism, worker's compensation claims, and litigation expenses, among others (de Wit et al., 2013; Hyman, 2013; Jimmieson et al., 2017; Longe, 2015; McKenzie, 2015). This problem has underscored the need for nonprofit organizations to understand what leadership behaviors are conducive to lower levels of interpersonal conflict that can create a culture of peace where employees can thrive in.

Studies have found that servant leaders' others-oriented focus and moral and selfless behaviors engender trust and respect among followers which positively influences interpersonal conflict through trusting relationships and enhanced collaboration and communication (Fields, 2018; Graham, 1991; Jit et al., 2017, Joseph, 2006; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Spears, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of this quantitative correlational study was to determine the relationship between servant leadership behaviors and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. This chapter discusses the findings and implications of the research question and hypotheses and presents the study's limitations and recommendations for future research and practical application.

## Discussion of Findings

This study investigated the research question: What is the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings? The hypotheses addressed the relationships between the subscales of servant leadership (empowerment, standing back, accountability, forgiveness, courage, authenticity, humility, and stewardship) and the subscales of interpersonal conflict in the workplace (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, non-task organizational conflict). Using the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) and the Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale (ICOS), this study used correlational analysis to determine if there was a statistically significant negative relationship between higher levels of servant leadership and lower levels of interpersonal conflict in nonprofit organizational settings.

For the sample used in this study, the results of the Spearman's rho correlations were negatively related for each variable. This means that there is a significant negative relationship between servant leadership, as defined by the SLS scale, and interpersonal conflict in the workplace, as defined by the ICOS scale. This suggests that as servant leadership increases in organizations, interpersonal workplace conflict decreases. This study furthers the literature in servant leadership that links servant leader compassionate, humane, and participative behaviors to increased unity, trust, and cohesion among followers, which creates a collaborative work environment that is conducive for problem-solving (Fields, 2018; Jit et al., 2016; Joseph, 2006; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

The hypotheses examined the relationships between each of the subscales of servant leadership and interpersonal conflict in the workplace. The results of the Spearman's rho correlations were negatively related for all of servant leadership subscales, except for courage;

with forgiveness having the strongest relationship, followed by stewardship, and finally empowerment. Servant leadership behaviors of forgiveness, stewardship, empowerment, standing back, accountability, authenticity, and humility were all negatively and significantly correlated with each of the four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales: task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict. Consequently, the anticipated results of a negative relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict were met.

### ***Forgiveness***

As defined in the SLS scale, forgiveness lets go of past wrongdoings through interpersonal acceptance when faced with offenses, argument, and mistakes; it is about forgiving others while having empathy and understanding their perspectives through behaviors of warmth and compassion (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). In this study, forgiveness was negatively and significantly correlated with all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). This dimension had the highest correlation of all subscales, signifying that the more servant leaders let go of their employees' past wrongdoings, forgive offenses and mistakes, while seeking to understand with an attitude of empathy, acceptance, warmth and compassion, the less their followers will experience interpersonal conflict stemming from disagreements regarding work task performance, how duties are done, due to a lack of relational trust, or disagreements regarding differences in organizational leadership.

Trust is created through forgiveness when servant leaders let go of employee's mistakes and wrongdoings because their priority is to put follower's development and interests above those of the organization, which employees reciprocate out of gratitude for the leader (Chan &

Mak, 2014; Gouldner, 1960; Newman, Schwarz et al., 2017; Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010). Trust is increased when employees feel their leader's intentions and motives are good (Chan & Mak, 2014), which can be achieved through forgiveness by modeling interpersonal acceptance through empathy, understanding, and the compassionate behaviors of servant leaders (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Therefore, these findings may be explained by the high level of trust that is created as servant leaders accept others and allow them to make mistakes without fear of rejection or repercussion; which creates "high-quality interpersonal relationships through a better understanding of the behavior of others" (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011, p. 252). An atmosphere of trust creates a work environment that bring out the best in people, because when individuals are in trusting relationships, they are more willing to listen to each other, take responsibility for their actions as well as openly discuss issues; all of which are essential for effective conflict resolution and which reduces interpersonal workplace conflict (Leon-Perez et al., 2016; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Uzun & Ayik, 2016). Furthermore, Jit et al. (2017) contended that as servant leaders model empathy and compassion, followers are unified, strive to work things out amicably while creating strong relationships amongst each other. The Bible confirms that forgiving others is essential for healthy relationships; it increases love (Proverbs 17:9), joy (Psalm 32:1-5), empathy (Luke 7:47), prosperity and mercy towards others (Proverbs 28:13); healing and refreshing (1 Jn 1:9; Acts 3:19); decreases bitterness (Hebrews 12:14-15), and elicits forgiveness in return (Mark 11:25; Matthew 6:14). The opposite of forgiveness is separation from God and others, bitterness, anger, rage, and all kinds of malice (Ephesians 4:30-32). Instead, God, who wants the best, encourages to love and forgive one another; Proverbs 17:9 says "Love prospers when a fault is forgiven, but dwelling on it separates close friends."

From a social learning perspective, through their inclination towards emotional healing, servant leaders naturally employ helpful conflict management styles of integrating as well as fostering helpful behaviors among their employees when resolving conflict (Fields, 2018). By role modeling forgiveness, followers of servant leaders learn how to forgive others' mistakes and wrongdoings in a compassionate way and they are transformed when they practice those behaviors with others in the workplace (Bandura, 1977; Eva et al., 2019; Gouldner, 1960).

### ***Stewardship***

This dimension was measured by a manager's focus on social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork, as well as a manager's long-term vision and how much they emphasize the importance of focusing on the good of the whole (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Stewardship was negatively and significantly correlated with all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). This subscale had the second highest correlation, signifying that the more servant leaders communicate a long-term vision, emphasize the good of the whole, and stimulate followers to act in the common interest of all to enhance social responsibility, conflict regarding work tasks, performance, and relationship and organizational differences is greatly reduced.

Several studies confirm that servant leadership creates a service culture that increases corporate social responsibility and organizational citizenship behaviors at all levels of the organization as employees personally identify with the organization's service climate and work towards enhancing organizational outcomes that decreases their desire to leave the organization or create conflict for others (Burton et al., 2017; Coetzer et al., 2017; Sengupta & Sengupta, 2018). De Dreu et al. (2001) affirmed that managers' pro-social orientation results in constructive problem-solving that produces win-win outcomes. When employees are committed



and motivated to help one another for the good of the whole, a problem-solving mindset leads them to “proactively make suggestions and recommendations to address organizational issues” thereby reducing unhelpful, antisocial behaviors (Lapoint & Vandenberghe, 2018, p. 111). The Bible affirms these findings by encouraging individuals to use their gifts to help others by being good stewards (1 Peter 4:10), that there is great reward in teamwork (Ecclesiastes 4:9), and that all these things should be done for the good of the whole (1 Corinthians 12:7), not losing sight of the long-term reward given in heaven (1 Corinthians 15:58; Matthew 6: 19-21).

### ***Empowerment***

As defined by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) in the SLS scale, empowerment “aims at fostering a pro-active, self-confident attitude among followers and gives them a sense of personal power” (p. 251). In this study, empowerment was negatively and significantly correlated with all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). This subscale had the third-highest correlation, signifying that the more servant leaders shift authority and share power with their employees, the less their followers engage in interpersonal conflict stemming from differences regarding a work task, its process, differences in personality, and/or because of poor organizational leadership. From a social learning perspective, Hunter et al. (2013) and Song et al. (2015) explained that by modeling desirable servant leadership qualities of helping others and sharing information, servant leaders create a culture of empowerment that encourages and promotes helping behaviors amongst followers. As servant leaders seek to develop others, they build community by sharing leadership which creates a caring organizational environment that is high in trust and morale, which is a key moderator in the escalation of conflict (Laub, 1999; Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2014; Simmons & Peterson, 2000).

From a social exchange perspective, as employees seek to reciprocate their leaders' positive actions to restore balance in their relationships, they will apply their newly learned behaviors of sharing, encouraging, and helping others with their leaders, as well as colleagues, to accomplish their goals (Gouldner, 1960; Torkelson et al., 2016). Consequently, employees will have an increased sense of empowerment that motivates them to exhibit servant leader behaviors themselves, impacting the entire organization. This same principle is true in how God relates to individuals; He not only shares information about his plans and purposes (Amos 3:7; Daniel 2:22; Psalm 25:14) and provides instruction each step of the way (Psalm 32:8), He also shares his authority and power to empower individuals to accomplish the plan he has for their lives (Isaiah 40: 29-31; Luke 10: 19).

### ***Standing Back***

This dimension of servant leadership is “about the extent to which a leader gives priority to the interest of others first and gives them the necessary support and credits... it is also about retreating into the background when a task has successfully been accomplished” (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011, p. 252). Standing back was negatively and significantly correlated with all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). This suggests that as servant leaders keep themselves in the background and give credit to others, do not chase after recognition or rewards, and enjoys their colleagues' success more than their own, their organizations will experience less disagreements regarding what, how, and when tasks should be done because of personal dislikes or resulting from disagreements over organizational-related issues.

This finding may be explained by the selfless nature of servant leaders. Chiniara and Bentein (2018) confirmed that as servant leaders put the needs of followers above their own self-

interest, their collective performance is enhanced through the high-quality leader-member relationships that are formed. Furthermore, follower trust and engagement result from servant leadership as the leader chooses to selflessly serve others to meet their needs, even if it means placing those needs above their own (Simons & Peterson, 2000; van Dierendonck, 2011). As servant leaders emphasize, through their actions, the importance of selflessly serving others, it encourages and motivates followers to put others' needs above their own as well, thereby reducing the amount of disagreements at work (Liden et al., 2014; Schwarz et al., 2016). Jesus modeled standing back when he emphasized that as the Son of God, he came to earth not to be served, but to serve others (Matthew 20:28), seeking only God's glory (John 7:18, 8:50), while encouraging people to value others above themselves, looking to meet others' interests (Philippians 2:2-4) and, like Him, doing it all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

### ***Accountability***

This subscale is about ensuring employees know what is expected of them, while holding them responsible for the results; it is also a "powerful tool to show confidence in one's followers" (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011, p. 252). Accountability was negatively and significantly correlated with three of the four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict); but not significantly correlated with task process conflict. The results indicate that as servant leaders set clear expectations for their employees' work and hold them responsible for the results, interpersonal conflict regarding the goals of work outcomes, relational and organizational issues are reduced, while conflict regarding how and when a work task should be performed is not significantly affected.

These findings are supported by Chiniara and Bentein (2016), who found that one of the reasons why followers are more satisfied under a servant leader is because they feel that “their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are being met” (p. 135). Furthermore, when leaders support their employees, hold them accountable, communicate clearly, and value them, they foster the kind of collaboration that promotes and increases effectiveness within workgroups (Irving & Longbotham, 2007). Finally, from a social exchange perspective, when individuals feel autonomy in the way they do their jobs, and that their supervisor trusts them to get their work done, they will reciprocate their supervisor’s trust and strive to succeed in meeting organizational goals (Gouldner, 1960; Simons & Peterson, 2000). This shifts employees’ focus back on the work itself rather than on the interpersonal conflict that can stem from working in groups. As a servant leader, Jesus not only ensures that individuals know what is expected of them (John 14:26; John 16:13; Psalm 32:8) and holds them accountable for it (James 3:1; Matthew 12:36; Romans 4:12), but also encourages them to do the same for others in an effort to restore relationships (Matthew 18:15-19).

### *Courage*

This subscale was measured by how much risk a manager takes when trying new approaches and facing challenges regardless of opposition; this is done by strongly relying on personal values and convictions as a guide to one’s actions (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Courage had a nonsignificant correlation with the four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales. This suggests that interpersonal conflict in the workplace is not affected by whether or not managers take risks to accomplish goals when facing opposition. This finding may be explained by the unclear focus or motivation in the scale regarding why the leader takes risks and might be a reason why the developers of the scale removed it from the SLS short version in

2017, when it was removed to improve cross-cultural stability due to different interpretations across countries (van Dierendonck et al., 2017). The problem with having an unclear focus or motivation in taking risks is better explained in the differentiation of servant leadership from other leadership theories.

In differentiating servant leadership from authentic or ethical leadership, studies found that an authentic leader is motivated by personal conviction and internal moral standards, which, if challenged, will take precedence over the employees' needs (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Ethical leadership is also different from servant leadership in that the focus of an ethical leader in decision-making is based on rules to follow that are in alignment with how the leader thinks things should be done (Brown et al., 2005; Eva et al., 2019). Both theories have a self-serving component that is not a characteristic of servant leadership. Servant leaders encourage ethical practices and the meeting of organizational goals out of a genuine concern and care for the development and growth of the follower rather than for the sake of being authentic or for simply following appropriate workplace behaviors (Eva et al., 2019; Van Dierendonck, 2011). In modelling courage, Jesus willingly faced great opposition and crucifixion, not by relying on personal values or convictions, but because of unconditional love and by giving his own life for the sake of others (John 10: 11-18; Matthew 20:28). Therefore, scripture teaches that people should courageously lay down their lives for others out of love (1 John 3:16) because God is with them no matter where they go (Joshua 1:9) and it is in His strength, power, and help that individuals can courageously face challenges in life (Deuteronomy 31:6; Isaiah 41:10; Ephesians 6:10). Future researchers may want to consider redefining courage to account for the selfless and others-oriented nature that drives servant leaders to take risks and differentiates servant leadership from other leadership theories.

### ***Authenticity***

This subscale was measured by how transparent managers are both privately and publicly, how open they are about their weaknesses, and how much they express their true feelings to those around them (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Authenticity was negatively and significantly correlated with three of the four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, and non-task organizational conflict); but not significantly correlated with relationship conflict. The results indicate that when managers are open about their limitations and express their feelings to their staff when they are touched by events surrounding them, there is a diminishing of disagreements regarding the goals of a work task, the process of duties performed, and disputes over organizational-related issues, while conflict regarding relationships and differences in personality is not significantly affected. Jit et al. (2016) confirmed that servant leaders' displays of open communication skills are conducive to collaborative conflict resolution via their humane, persuasive, and participative conflict management styles. Additionally, by reflecting genuine and authentic concern for follower's needs and development, servant leaders help organizations flourish as follower commitment and engagement is strengthened (Greenleaf, 2016; Parris & Peachey, 2013; van Dierendonck, 2011; Yang et al., 2017). Throughout scripture, God encourages individuals to be truthful and genuine (John 17:17; Romans 12:9), transparent with one another so they can be healed (James 5:16), because it is only by being truthful and acknowledging weaknesses that people are set free (John 8:32).

### ***Humility***

This subscale was measured by the ability of a manager to not only admit mistakes and recognize weaknesses, but learn from them and accept critical feedback (van Dierendonck &

Nuijten, 2011). Humility was negatively and significantly correlated with all four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales (task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict). The results suggest that when leaders receive criticism or make mistakes, they publicly make an effort to try to learn from them; thereby reducing disagreements regarding incompatible ideas of the outcome of a work task, how work should be performed, company policies, and relationship differences. These findings are explained by van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) who asserted that attitudes of humility, gratitude, forgiveness, and altruism stem from a leader's compassionate love, which promotes follower empowerment, authenticity, and stewardship resulting in the follower's overall wellbeing. When a servant leader displays humility, they can admit their mistakes and genuinely learn from them because their ultimate goal is not to be right or win an argument but learn and grow so they can benefit others as an expression of their selfless love. Joseph (2006) confirmed that servant leaders' characteristics of service, vision, and humility lead to a more peaceful approach to resolving interpersonal conflict. From a social learning perspective, as individuals interact with the humble behaviors of their leader, they learn, and it causes a permanent change in behavior marked by admission of mistakes, learning and acceptance of criticism, all of which lead to peaceful approaches in resolving conflict (Bandura, 1977; Joseph, 2006; Werner, 2017). Jesus modeled humility by accepting the Father's will in obedience (Philippians 2:6-8) and taught the Apostles that as leaders, they must be servants first (Mark 10: 42-45), because it is the humble who will be exalted (Luke 14:11) and enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18: 1-4).

### **Implications**

Building on prior research, the current study explored the ways in which servant leadership influences interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Drawing on social learning theory

and social exchange theory, this study identified seven behaviors that reduce organizational conflict. The findings of this study have practical implications for leaders and organizations alike, which can help address the consequences of ineffective leadership behaviors that result in great human and financial cost. Contributions to leadership theory and the larger body of knowledge derived from this research provide new insights in three main areas: effective leadership behaviors, cultural impact, and organizational outcomes. Implications of these findings point to a greater organizational benefit that is created by heeding these insights: the creation of a peaceful, selfless, and others-oriented environment comprised of an engaged, committed, and satisfied workforce.

### ***Leadership***

There are numerous practical implications of this study to solve real and significant leadership problems, many of which are illustrated through principles for leaders taught in the Bible, specifically by Jesus Christ, often considered one of the greatest servant leaders in world history. In exemplifying authenticity, Jesus was described by the Apostle John as, “full of truth” (John 1:14). Rather than taking credit for his accomplishments, he often gave credit to God (John 8:50). Furthermore, Jesus taught that forgiveness of others is essential to receiving God’s forgiveness (Mark 11:25; Matthew 6:15) and results in our wellbeing (1 Jn 1:9; Acts 3:19; Proverbs 28:13), that his followers should make great effort to hold others accountable for their actions and resolve conflict (Matthew 18:15-19), that humility is an essential behavior for leaders (Mark 10: 42-45), and that serving others was the responsibility of those who are in charge (Matthew 20:25-28; John 13:12-17), which he exemplified by taking the very nature of a servant (Philippians 2:7) and giving his own life for the sake of others (Matthew 20:28). Jesus’ vision has inspired and empowered millions, perhaps billions of people throughout much of world



history to adopt servant leadership behaviors and practice them in the workplace as well as in their personal lives. He encourages individuals to use their talents to help others by being good stewards (1 Peter 4:10), while empowering through his instruction, authority, and power (Isaiah 40: 29-31; Luke 10: 19; Psalm 32:8) because it results in great reward (1 Corinthians 15:58; Matthew 6:19-21). The examples and teaching of Jesus therefore imply that leaders should practice the servant leadership behaviors of forgiveness, stewardship, empowerment, standing back, accountability, authenticity, and humility.

The findings of this study show that leaders influence the nature and strength of the relationship between their behaviors and their employees' engagement in interpersonal workplace conflict. More precisely, the findings indicate that servant leaders can help reduce conflict in the workplace through behaviors of forgiveness, stewardship, empowerment, humility, humbleness, accountability, and authenticity. A major finding of this study revealed that through behaviors of forgiveness, managers augment trust by showing acceptance, compassion, and empathy (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). This finding is confirmed by Simons and Peterson (2000) who agreed that servant leaders' behaviors promote trust, which is a key moderator in reducing interpersonal conflict. Furthermore, because one of the major sources of workplace conflict is when leaders fail to intervene and provide support for employees to effectively address counterproductive workplace behavior (Deutsch, 1973; Jaramillo et al., 2011; O'Sullivan, 2017); this study shows the importance of leaders to role model servant leadership behaviors that can be learned and reciprocated, as employees may engage in retaliatory behavior due to unresolved conflict (Bandura, 1977; Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006; Gouldner, 1960).

Servant leaders are essential to creating a harmonious environment in the workplace. Bruk-Lee and Spector (2006) confirmed that as a result of conflict with a supervisor, employees

reported higher levels of negative emotions, which increased their counterproductive behaviors at work. Because servant leaders display more humane, empathetic, and open communication skills, they establish trusting relationships with their employees that can mitigate the consequences of interpersonal conflict in the workplace (Jit et al., 2016; Joseph, 2006). Furthermore, because high emotionality and low trust can escalate conflict (Jehn, 1997; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Yang & Mossholder, 2004), through humility and their selfless and others-oriented behaviors, servant leaders can minimize the effects of the dysfunctional, emotional conflict by helping them reduce negative emotional responses and destructive behavioral manifestations (Joseph, 2006; Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2006).

Blake and Mouton (1964) were the first to theorize that “every manager carries on his own shoulders responsibility for solving human problems associated with achieving maximum results through the productive utilization of people. The question is, how can this be best accomplished?” (p. ix). This study answers this question by confirming that servant leaders’ natural selfless presence, service, and nobility help reduce the negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with attainment of employee’s goals by being forgiving, good stewards, empowering, meek, humble, accountable, and authentic (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). As confirmed through social learning and social exchange theory perspectives, when employees observe their leader’s effective behaviors, they not only learn them, but practice them with others in the workplace, fostering a culture of servant leadership in the workplace.

### ***Culture***

The implications of this study’s findings are of great significance for shaping the culture of organizations. Servant leadership behaviors can foster the emergence of a peaceful, selfless,

trusting, helping, and others-oriented environment that is low in interpersonal conflict. Servant leaders influence an organization's culture in a positive way as they embody behaviors that focuses on meeting other's needs, which followers emulate and model for others in the workplace. Drawing from a social learning perspective, employees observe and learn from their manager's role-modeling of service and helping behaviors that emphasize the norms and expectations for behaviors and then act it out amongst each other (Bandura, 1977; Hunter et al., 2013; Liden et al., 2014; Schein, 2010). This has a replicating effect, as employee's role model these positive behaviors with others, which changes the entire organization by teaching others effective conflict management behaviors that help employees deescalate conflict on their own.

Servant leaders are the key to creating organizational cultures that can effectively manage conflict. Specifically, this study found that all four types of organizational conflict are reduced by behaving in compassionate, selfless, forgiving, and empowering ways – all of which makeup a servant leadership culture. Mahembe and Engelbrecht (2014) confirmed that a caring organizational environment that is high in trust and morale is created by servant leaders as they exemplify respect for employees and strive to develop them further. The establishment of a servant leadership culture not only helps reduce interpersonal workplace conflict, but changes the culture to one that is helpful, service-oriented, cohesive, and which provides an increased sense of empowerment, organizational commitment, and work engagement (van Dierendonck et al., 2013; Van Winkle et al., 2014). Ultimately, by inculcating a servant leadership culture, organizations are free to fulfill their vision without the costly human and financial consequences that result from unresolved conflict in the workplace.

## ***Organization***

A final contribution from this study's findings goes beyond reducing conflict in the workplace and directly impacts an organization's finances. This study sought to address the problem of ineffective leadership behaviors that increases workplace conflict and results in increased human and financial costs, such as decreased organizational performance (Longe, 2015), increased absence and tardiness (Liu et al., 2015), and decreased motivation (de Wit et al., 2013), among others, that come as a result of an employee's job-related stress, burnout, and increased turnover intentions (Jimmieson et al., 2017). Drawing on social exchange theory, the findings of this study demonstrate that as leaders model servant leadership behaviors, employees benefit from an increased sense of unity and cohesion that come as they observe their leader's behaviors and reciprocate them out of gratitude. Liden et al. (2014) affirmed that servant leadership increases performance and commitment as employees identify with their organization through an increased affective attachment that promotes an acceptance of learned values. In other words, when leaders model servant leadership behaviors, organizations benefit from employees who are empowered, committed, and engaged (van Dierendonck et al., 2013; Van Winkle et al., 2014) freeing them to fulfil their vision and mission.

A committed, satisfied, and engaged workforce that can navigate through conflict effectively can give way to increased performance, creativity, and overall productivity among employees at all levels. Leaders using a servant leadership style are found to increase work engagement and commitment (individual level), organizational citizenship behavior (team level), and performance (organizational level; Coetzer et al., 2017). By reducing the amount of time employees engage in interpersonal conflict through a servant leadership approach, organizations can focus on fulfilling their goals without the financial impact that can come from increased

turnover, litigation expenses, and other financial costs that deplete organizations of valuable funds, time, and energy.

This study's findings have implications that may be uniquely suited to nonprofit organizations. Due to the more selfless and others-oriented culture in comparison to public and private organizations (Ghosh & Khatri, 2018; Liden et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2004), utilizing the servant leadership style may aid nonprofit organizations in achieving their mission due to the unique constraints of reduced employee compensation, limited resources, and focus on mission over profit. Because they are competing for the same leadership talent with public and private organizations (Allen et al., 2018), a culture of minimized conflict may attract talented leadership and maximize limited resources.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations for this study due to the objective and predetermined nature of its quantitative research design. First, because participants were not able to provide insight into their feelings regarding why they felt the way they did when answering the survey questions, this study could not provide the meaning behind the resulting correlations. Specifically, the reason why the courage subscale did not have a significant negative correlation with the ICOS scale is unknown.

A second limitation is that the data gathered were the self-reported perceptions of employees via an online survey questionnaire regarding their managers and workplace, posing a limitation regarding verification or clarification of responses by the researcher. The quality of these results may be limited as the perceptions regarding the work environment may be different for each person based on their interpretation of the questions. Because of this, their answers may

not have been an accurate representation of their experiences based on the intent of the question asked.

Finally, a third limitation is that the cross-sectional nature of this study resulted in a single point in time collection of the data. This made it unfeasible to measure servant leadership behaviors and levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace over a period of time, which would have included other contributing factors that could increase conflict in the workplace and provided increased generalizability of the findings. For example, this study did not include conflict in the workplace that may have stemmed from health-related issues such as the current COVID-19 pandemic that began earlier in the year.

### **Recommendations**

The current study extends the literature on servant leadership and interpersonal conflict in the workplace. It provides additional insight into the servant leadership behaviors that can help reduce organizational conflict through social learning and social exchange lenses. The findings of this study reveal several opportunities that nonprofit organizations can benefit from when inculcating a culture of servant leadership. The following section delineates recommendations for practical applications of servant leadership, followed by suggestions for future study that would give additional insight into the servant leadership and interpersonal conflict relationship.

#### ***Recommendations for Practical Application***

Leaders are catalysts in shaping, changing, and creating cultures who can influence an entire organization in positive or negative ways. Ineffective leader behaviors can significantly increase the level of conflict in the workplace, which diverts leaders from fulfilling the vision of the organization and leads to higher financial costs. For this reason, leaders are encouraged to role model servant leadership behaviors that enhance trust with their employees, creating safe

and peaceful work environments that employees can thrive in. Once trust is established by modeling forgiveness and other servant leadership behaviors, leaders can inspire employees to join in the fulfillment of the vision through behaviors of stewardship, empowerment, and accountability; while being humble, authentic, and giving praise for their followers' accomplishments.

**Building Trust.** The findings of this study highlight the importance of leaders to create environments of trust among their followers: it is the basis for the effectiveness of servant leadership in reducing interpersonal workplace conflict. To foster trusting relationships, leaders must first practice forgiveness, while being compassionate and empathetic with employees. This can be done by forgiving them for their errors and not criticizing their past mistakes. Instead, leaders should come alongside their employees with a helpful and servant attitude with the end goal of helping them learn, develop, and succeed. Practicing forgiveness, empathy, and compassion will create high quality relationships where employees are more willing listen to each other, take responsibility for their actions as well as openly discuss issues (Leon-Perez et al., 2016; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Uzun & Ayik, 2016).

**Inspiring Vision.** An environment of trust helps inspire followers to join in accomplishing the organization's mission. By modeling stewardship, servant leaders should emphasize the importance of focusing on how the organizational vision benefits the good of the whole. Additionally, highlighting the societal responsibility of the work creates an others-oriented culture in which members seek to serve and help others without pursuing self-interests. Managers can do this by helping employees see the link between their daily tasks and the mission while also empowering them by giving them needed information, resources, and by encouraging them to develop themselves further. Organizations can implement a day of service,

where employees can work for a day in a different area that is directly linked to the services that the organization provides, which allows employees to see how their part helps the overall vision of the organization and its societal impact.

Finally, managers are encouraged to show confidence in their employee by holding them accountable for their work and how they carry it out. Accountability brings emphasis on the leadership portion of servant leadership theory, and it is an effective piece once a leader shares their authority with employees in an effort to provide them with new opportunities to grow, learn new skills, lead, and become servant leaders themselves (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Holding employees accountable can be done on a semi-annual basis through formal and informal evaluations and/or training and feedback sessions with the end goal to develop them and reevaluate their progress at the next meeting cycle.

**Behavioral Effectiveness.** Building trust, inspiring a vision, and encouraging accountability are done when leaders are transparent, humble, and give credit to others. Servant leaders can practice humility by learning from their mistakes, being open to critical feedback, and learning from the different views of others. Practically, this can be done by implementing 360-degree evaluations, where leaders can receive feedback from their subordinates, colleagues, and supervisors. Then, in a spirit of authenticity, servant leaders should be open about their limitations and weaknesses and express their feelings in a truthful and transparent way with a plan of action to improve on their shortcomings. This can be done in staff meetings that discuss everyone's areas of improvement while adopting a "green/yellow/red" approach to evaluating themselves. In this approach, green are all the things the leader does well and should keep on doing, yellow are all the things that need changed, and red are all the ineffective things the leader does that they should stop doing. This meeting should be a safe place where behaviors



can be addressed without fear of repercussion, but in a spirit of transparency and openness, genuinely seeking to learn and grow from each other.

Finally, servant leaders should keep themselves in the background, give credit where credit is due, and not seek their own recognition or awards, but recognize that their success is a result of their followers' combined efforts. This can be accomplished by giving employees praise for their efforts privately and publicly on a regular basis. During one-on-one meetings, leaders should point out the specific things an employee has done to accomplish a goal or a task, as well as during informal conversations with their team, in all-employee meetings, and at annual recognition or staff appreciation events.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

The recommendations for future research are derived from the unexpected findings of this study, as well as its limitations. First, correlational findings revealed that behaviors of authenticity did not significantly reduce relationship conflict. This was an unexpected finding given that prior research indicates that when leaders are open and transparent, it results in collaboration and increased performance because of the focus on mutual interests and work-related priorities that allows individuals to work through interpersonal conflict successfully (DeChurch et al., 2013; Jit et al., 2016; Thompson, 1991); therefore, future researchers may want to consider investigating the effects of authenticity on relationship conflict. Second, correlational findings revealed that behaviors of accountability did not significantly reduce task process conflict. This was also an unexpected finding given that prior research indicates that when leaders support their employees, hold them accountable, communicate clearly, and value them, the leaders foster the kind of collaboration that promotes and increases effectiveness within

workgroups (Irving & Longbotham, 2007); therefore, future studies may want to consider investigating the effects of accountability on task process conflict.

Moreover, correlational findings revealed that courage had a nonsignificant correlation with the four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales. Given the definition of courage as defined by the SLS, the discrepancy in these findings may be due to the unclear focus or motivation regarding why the leader might take risks. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) measured courage by how much risk a manager took when trying new approaches and facing challenges regardless of opposition, which they do by strongly relying on personal values and convictions. Prior studies differentiated servant leadership from ethical and authentic leadership by emphasizing the selfless and others-oriented nature of servant leadership as opposed to the self-serving focus and motivation of the other theories (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Brown et al., 2005; Eva et al., 2019; Van Dierendonck, 2011). The courage subscale and survey questions may have lacked the selfless nature of servant leaders, making it confusing for individuals to link this behavior with servant leader attributes. Future researchers may want to consider redefining courage to account for the selfless and others-oriented nature that drives servant leaders to take risks and differentiates it from other leadership theories.

Finally, the cross-sectional nature of this correlational study measured servant leadership behaviors and the levels of interpersonal conflict in the workplace in a single point in time. This made it difficult to understand the meaning behind some of the results that might be more apparent through a different research design. For example, a qualitative study may shed light on the reasons why accountability was not significantly correlated with task process; a longitudinal study could also point to how a leader's authentic nature impacts relationship conflict over a long period of time. Therefore, future research might explore qualitative or longitudinal designs to

understand the nature and meaning of the relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal conflict in the workplace.

### **Summary**

Workplace conflict depletes nonprofit organizations of valuable time and energy. Ineffective leadership behaviors can create contentious organizational cultures that result in great financial and human cost. Drawing from a social learning and social exchange theory perspective, the aim of this quantitative correlational study was to determine the relationship between servant leadership behaviors and interpersonal workplace conflict in nonprofit organizational settings in the United States. The intended goal of this research was to understand if servant leadership behaviors reduced interpersonal workplace conflict. Specifically, this study examined the relationship between the subscales of servant leadership (standing back, forgiveness, courage, empowerment, accountability, authenticity, humility, and stewardship) and the subscales of interpersonal workplace conflict (task outcome, task process, relationship, non-task organizational conflict).

Building on prior research, this study identified seven leadership behaviors that reduce organizational conflict. The results of the Spearman's rho correlations were negatively related for all of servant leadership subscales, except for courage; with forgiveness having the strongest relationship, followed by stewardship, and finally empowerment. Servant leadership behaviors of forgiveness, stewardship, empowerment, standing back, accountability, authenticity, and humility were all negatively and significantly correlated with each of the four interpersonal workplace conflict subscales: task outcome, task process, relationship conflict, and non-task organizational conflict. Consequently, the anticipated results of a negative relationship between servant leadership and interpersonal workplace conflict were met.

This study contributed to leadership theory and the existing body of knowledge by providing new insights for both leaders and organizations alike. Implications for leaders are centered on the finding that their behaviors create and shape an organization's culture, and through forgiving behaviors that promote trust, they can create a peaceful, collaborative, and cohesive work environment. From a Biblical perspective, Jesus who is often considered one of the greatest servant leaders in world history, role-modeled and taught on these principles while emphasizing the benefits and great rewards practicing these behaviors would bring. Implications for organizations highlight how inculcating servant leadership directly affects the bottom line and the successful fulfillment of their vision. When interpersonal conflict is reduced and trust in a leader increases, employees are free to focus on their work, helpful interpersonal behaviors increase, and employees are unified and personally identify with the organization. This translates to increased engagement, commitment, and performance, which reduces financial costs associated with litigation, counterproductive behaviors that hurt productivity, and turnover intentions, among others.

In light of the findings and implications of this study, several recommendations were proposed that can practically help leaders, nonprofit organizations, and future researchers. Recommendations for leaders and nonprofit organizations include creating an environment of trust through behaviors of forgiveness, inspiring a vision through behaviors of empowerment, stewardship, and accountability, and ensuring their behaviors are effective by modeling humility, authenticity, and standing back. Recommendations for future research include redefining courage to include the selfless nature of servant leadership, exploring the effects of accountability on task process, and investigating how authenticity impacts relationship conflict. Inculcating servant leadership behaviors in the workplace can have implications for the emergence of a peaceful,

forgiving, and trusting organizational environment, wherein the workforce may become more unified, cooperative, and productive, promoting the successful fulfillment of an organization's mission.

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## **Appendix A: Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations Scale**

### Task Outcome Subscale

The following questions ask about your interpersonal relationships at work. Please indicate how often you experience each of the following events in your present job.

1. Do you disagree with someone on the goals of a work task?
2. Do you have differences in opinion regarding what should be the end product of a work task?
3. Do you disagree with someone on what is the content of a work task to be performed?
4. Do you get into conflicts with someone over what should be done in a work task?
5. Do you have incompatible ideas regarding what should be the outcome of a work task?

### Task Process Subscale

The following questions ask about your interpersonal relationships at work. Please indicate how often you experience each of the following events in your present job.

1. Do you argue with someone over how you manage your work task(s)?
2. Do you disagree with someone because of something you or they do in performing the work task(s)?
3. Are you in conflict with someone over how work task(s) are assigned?
4. Do you have differences in opinion regarding WHEN a work task should be performed?
5. Do you have differences in opinion regarding HOW a work task should be performed?

### Relationship Subscale

The following questions ask about your interpersonal relationships at work. Please indicate how often you experience each of the following events in your present job.

1. Do you get into disagreement with others at work because of differences in personality?
2. Do you disagree with someone at work due to differences in personal values?

3. Do you argue with someone at work because you do not like working together?
4. Do you differ in opinion with someone at work because you simply cannot get along?
5. Do you get into conflicts with others at work because of a lack of personal trust?

#### Non-task Organizational Subscale

The following questions ask about your interpersonal relationships at work. Please indicate how often you experience each of the following events in your present job.

1. Are you in a dispute with someone at work caused by differences in organizational power?
2. Are you in a disagreement with someone at work because of a company policy?
3. Do you disagree with someone about the hiring decisions in your organization?
4. Do you disagree with someone over organizational-related issues that do not pertain to a specific work task? (i.e., policies, organizational culture, benefits)
5. Do you dispute with someone at work because of poor organizational leadership?

All items are rated:

- 1 = Never
- 2 = Once or Twice
- 3 = Once or Twice a MONTH
- 4 = Once or Twice a WEEK
- 5 = Every Day

## **Appendix B: Servant Leadership Survey**

Item numbers refer to the items place in the survey.

### Empowerment Subscale

1. My manager gives me the information I need to do my work well.
2. My manager encourages me to use my talents.
3. My manager helps me to further develop myself.
4. My manager encourages his/her staff to come up with new ideas.
5. My manager gives me the authority to take decisions which make work easier for me.
6. My manager enables me to solve problems myself instead of just telling me what to do.
7. My manager offer me abundant opportunities to learn new skills.

### Standing back

8. My manager keeps himself/herself in the background and gives credits to others.
9. My manager is not chasing recognition or rewards for the things he/she does for others.
10. My manager appears to enjoy his/her colleagues' success more than his/her own.

### Accountability

11. My manager holds me responsible for the work I carry out.
12. I am held accountable for my performance by my manager.
13. My manager holds me and my colleagues responsible for the way we handle a job.

### Forgiveness

14. My manager keeps criticizing people for the mistakes they have made in their work (r).
15. My manager maintains a hard attitude towards people who have offended him/her at work (r)
16. My manager finds it difficult to forget things that went wrong in the past (r).

### Courage

17. My manager takes risks even when he/she is not certain of the support from his/her own manager.

18. My manager takes risks and does what needs to be done in his/her view.

#### Authenticity

19. My manager is open about his/her limitations and weaknesses.

20. My manager is often touched by the things he/she sees happening around him/her.

21. My manager is prepared to express his/her feelings even if this might have undesirable consequences.

22. My manager shows his/her true feelings to his/her staff.

#### Humility

23. My manager learns from criticism.

24. My manager tries to learn from the criticism he/she gets from his/her superior.

25. My manager admits his/her mistakes to his/her superior.

26. My manager learns from the different views and opinions of others.

27. If people express criticism, my manager tries to learn from it.

#### Stewardship

28. My manager emphasizes the importance of focusing on the good of the whole.

29. My manager has a long-term vision.

30. My manager emphasizes the societal responsibility of our work.

All items are rated:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Slightly Disagree

4 = Slightly Agree

5 = Agree

6 = Strongly Agree

## Appendix C: IRB Approval

**ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**  
*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



September 14, 2020

Lorena Morales  
Department of Graduate and Professional Studies  
Abilene Christian University

Dear Lorena,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "The Effect of Servant Leadership on Nonprofit Workplace Conflict",

(IRB# 20-137 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs