

SERVANT LEADERSHIP: AN EMPIRICAL SURVEY OF THE PREVALENCE OF THESE CHARACTERISTICS – COMPARING EMPLOYEES AND LEADERS

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Abstract: Requiring a particular leadership style means a need to train own leaders accordingly. Transformational leadership has received a lot of attention. One leadership style that is alike is servant leadership. Both are strongly employee-focused. Characteristics of a servant leader were weighted in terms of how present they are. Compared to leaders, employees rated these traits as less present. The number of participants is limited. Therefore, it is not possible to make a general statement. It offers opportunities for follow-up research that focus on whether transformational leadership is an intermediate step, and more employee orientation can be expected.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership, Leadership development.

Introduction

The importance of leadership development programs has grown in recent decades. Today, companies are willing to invest in the development of their leaders. One reason for this is the ability to disseminate information via the Internet and various social networks. As a result, every employee, and every person who encounters a company, becomes a potential feedback provider and contributes to the general opinion about that company. Because of their position in the hierarchy, leaders have contact with many of these stakeholders. In almost all cases, leaders have several employees and encounter potential employees during job interviews. The general opinion of a company, especially among younger employees, can be a decisive factor in the extent to which a company is considered as a potential employer.

The development of leaders within a company structure is one of the more recent challenges for companies, resulting from changed conditions. The development of many different leadership styles in recent decades represents a need to adapt to ensure the survival of each company.

Products and services offered by companies exist because they are demanded by different groups. A particular leadership style may also be chosen because it satisfies a particular demand. It may be a certain image that the company wants to project to the public, or a specific approach that certain groups expect when considering a company as a potential employer.

If we look at leadership from the perspective of the demands of employee groups, we focus on Generation Y, which is already established on the labor market, as well as Generation Z, a large proportion of which has already arrived in the world of work. These groups differ in some respects (e.g. the mixing of work and leisure is accepted by Generation Y, but not by Generation Z), but are very similar in their demands on leaders: Leaders, regarding both groups, must get used to the fact that statements made are immediately checked for accuracy via phone/internet. This is not to be understood as disrespect, but as an interest in the topic. The potential for conflict can be seen in having to argue with contradictions found on the Internet. Both generations seek flat hierarchies and respect experience, reasoned arguments, and authentic behavior¹.

Transformational Leadership

The consideration of these needs also characterizes modern leadership research, and thus a lot of attention is devoted to so-called transformational leadership. This leadership style is supposed to motivate employees through metaphysical goals. This refers to a satisfaction of needs at a higher level. This contrasts with material motivators, such as a regular salary, as it is the case with transactional leadership. One of the biggest challenges for a transformational leader is to align the employee's personal goals with the company's internal goals². Unlike transactional leadership, transformational leadership gives employees the opportunity to adopt their leader's value system. By broadening the value system of employees, leaders gain access to their intrinsic motivation. This approach can increase work motivation to a degree that is unattainable with transactional leadership. Empirical studies prove both the effectiveness of transformational leadership in general and its relevance in the context of change processes³.

Servant leadership is a leadership style that is very similar to transformational leadership in terms of employee orientation and development but is less recognized in practice. Examples are given in the following section. An overarching goal of this paper is to support the future accessibility of this leadership style.

Servant Leadership

The servant leadership style describes the so-called servant leader in the role of a supervisor. This leadership style is described by Maxwell with the words: “[...] the only way to create great relationships and results is through servant leadership. It’s all about putting other people first”⁴. Greenleaf, who was the first to publish and establish servant leadership in his book *The Servant as Leader* in 1970, describes this leadership style as follows: “The servant-leader is servant first [...] It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to

serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. [...] The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?"⁵. In addition to the above-average employee orientation, the concept also promises that the economic goal orientation of companies is also considered⁶.

In practice, servant leadership differs most from other leadership styles in its mindset, behavior, and leadership intentions. First and foremost, servant leadership is about serving people and helping them achieve their goals⁷. This is accomplished by modeling an extraordinary vision. This vision conveys the values by which the organization can be guided, and which fulfill the purpose of making the vision a reality [1].

Other aspects such as ethics and result-orientation are also covered with servant leadership. Therefore, servant leadership appears to be meaningful leadership in terms of securing sustainable results. This is achieved through practices that are known to develop high-performing organizations: (1) the definition of a higher purpose, visions and strategies; (2) Development of standardized and simplified procedures; (3) Customer-centric orientation; (4) Ensuring continuous growth and development; (5) Sharing power and information⁸ [2]. In addition, servant leadership proves to be relatively inexpensive to implement and develop. Individual results such as improved corporate citizenship behaviour and an increase in work and organizational commitment among employees are also evident [3].

Although the construct of servant leadership is described in the literature as *well understood*, there is a desire for further research related to individual, team, and organizational outcomes to gain further insight into its effectiveness [4, 5]. Implementation is also described as a challenge. This challenge is largely because the roles and functions of a servant leader do not appear to be clearly defined. Researchers and practitioners are calling for more clarity regarding ways to effectively apply the servant leader in an organizational context [6].

This publication examines how the individual characteristics of a servant leader are weighted by a group of employees and a group of leaders as perceived by each group. The survey of these two groups differs slightly in that employees rate their leaders and leaders rate themselves.

The expected result is that the group of leaders will rate themselves significantly higher than the group of employees on the characteristics of a servant leader.

These findings provide an opportunity to focus more on the weaker perceived traits in future research and practice implementation. Leadership training can also place more emphasis on the weaker traits. In addition, by

comparing different perceptions, potential points of conflict between employee and leader perceptions are identified. This provides the basis for a change of perspective in employee-leader conflict discussions.

The identification of the stronger and weaker characteristics of a servant leader should enrich future research, practical implementation, training and coaching so that these can be designed more effectively.

Research Methodology

The results of the empirical study were collected using an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was created in German, as the data collection took place in Germany. The first part asked different socio-demographic data. In the first part, participants also had to indicate whether they were taking the survey from the perspective of an employee or a leader. If a participant was both a leader and an employee, the participant could choose which perspective to take the survey from.

After the first part was completed, part two followed, in which 19 characteristics of a servant leader were presented. In general, the characteristics of a servant leader were identified by many authors. These include Greenleaf himself and Spears, who is CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. According to Greenleaf and Spears, the characteristics are named as shown in table 2.

These characteristics are a composite of Greenleaf's explanations of the skills that are essential as a servant leader and the characteristics that Spears filtered out of Greenleaf's writings in 1992⁹. Among the literatures mentioned, there are formulated texts on the respective characteristics. Based on these texts, shortened versions were created and presented to the participants. This was to ensure that no major differences in the understanding of the respective characteristics between the participants impaired the comparability of the results. With the shortened definitions, care was taken to clearly show the respective essence of the characteristic. The characteristic *Values* is taken as an example:

Values characteristic: The values of a servant leader include honesty, love, and responsibility. Responsibility means acting in a way that enriches the lives of others.

The characteristics were presented identically for the selection of employees and leaders. The following question differed with regard to this division. As an example, the characteristic of *Values* is considered again:

Do you recognize the described or comparable qualities in your leader's behavior?

Do you recognize the described or similar qualities in your behavior toward your employees?

The following five answer options were available for each characteristic: (1) not at all, (2) rather not, (3) in-between, (4) more likely, (5) absolute.

Time period and participants

The survey was launched on 01st September, 2019. The link to the survey was forwarded to fellow students and close acquaintances of the author of this paper. In addition, the described groups were encouraged to share the link with other people, which resulted in the survey being forwarded without the author’s knowledge. The survey was closed on November 01, 2019. Thus, this survey was accessible for two months. During this period, the survey was started 90 times and completed 71 times. The evaluation of the survey is based on all participants who completed the survey in full. Accordingly, Table 1 shows the results of 71 participants. Table 1 also shows that two participants were not employed at the time of the survey. This leaves a total of 69 participants who are included in the evaluation of the results. More information about the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic data of the participants included in the evaluation

Item	Description and answers				
Item 1	Existing employment relationship				
Answer	69 times yes		2 times no		
Item 2	Employee or Leader				
Answer	49 Employees		20 Leaders		
Item 3	Gender				
Answer	28 male	41 female		0 intersexual	
Item 4	Age				
Answer	3 times 16-23 years	15 times 24-30 years	21 times 31-40 years	13 times 41-50 years	17 times 50 years +

Results

The calculation of the data shown in Table 2 was carried out using the file that could be downloaded from the website used for the survey. In this xlsx-file the further evaluation was carried out in Excel. In accordance with the question presented here, Table 2 shows the comparison of the mean values (M) and standard deviation (SD) divided into the group’s *employees* and *leaders*, according to the answers given. Regarding the group of employees, the SD is higher than for the group of leaders. On average, this means that the value of each characteristic can be +- 1.21. In terms of SD, leaders are more uniform in their perception than the group of employees. Here, the mean of all results of the SD is +-0.89. Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of this for the results of the mean values per characteristic. In a comparison between these two

groups, the characteristic of Restraint shows the greatest agreement in terms of perceived presence, with 3.08 points for the group of employees and 3.10 points for the group of leaders.

There is also a high level of agreement on the characteristic of Self confidence, with 3.84 points for the group of employees and 3.90 points for the group of leaders. The perception of these two groups, in terms of mean values per characteristic, diverges the most in the Growing personality characteristic, with a difference of 1.43, Stewardship with 1.27, Building community with 1.25 and Persuasion with 1.10. Overall, leaders tended to rate themselves more strongly in the direction of servant leadership than how employees perceive their leaders. Figure 1 shows this accordingly.

Table 2. Comparison of the survey results

Characteristics	Evaluation			
	Employees		Leaders	
	M	SD	M	SD
Values	3.37	1.18	3.90	0.97
Goals	3.69	1.10	4.05	0.94
Listening	3.53	1.21	4.45	0.76
Speech is a leadership tool	3.12	1.15	3.75	0.97
Growing personality	2.82	1.29	4.25	0.85
Restraint	3.08	1.35	3.10	1.21
Tolerance of imperfection	3.47	1.26	4.15	0.81
Self confident	3.84	0.96	3.90	0.85
Acceptance	3.47	1.24	4.00	0.79
Foresight	3.04	1.14	3.85	0.49
Awareness	3.24	1.23	3.75	0.91
Spirit	3.31	1.25	4.20	0.83
Empathy	3.37	1.39	4.00	1.03
Healing	2.98	1.35	3.95	1.05
Persuasion	3.10	1.12	4.20	0.70
Conceptualization	3.39	1.13	3.90	0.79
Stewardship	2.73	1.27	4.00	0.86
Commitment to the growth of people	3.02	1.11	3.50	1.05
Building community	3.00	1.38	4.25	1.07
Mean value	3.24	1.21	3.96	0.89

Considering the sample presented here, the results correspond to the perception described in the question. Accordingly, the group of leaders perceive

themselves more strongly in the direction of servant leadership than the group of employees.

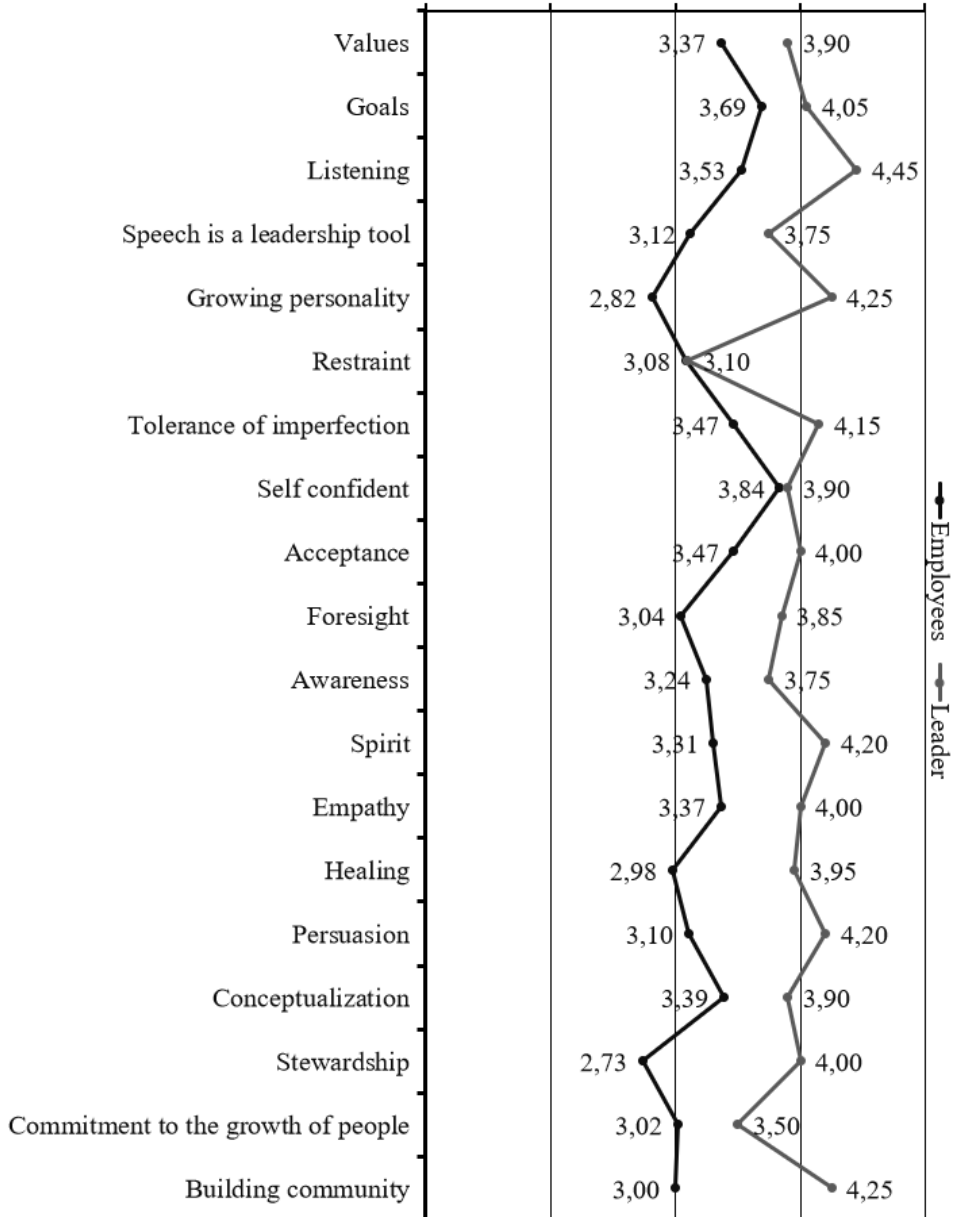


Fig. 1. Graphical representation of the results with regard to the mean values of the empirical study

Conclusions/discussion

The motivation for this paper came from the author's own perception that successful companies, such as Google or Facebook, give their employees freedom in terms of working hours and working environment. Regarding the working environment, the modern development of office concepts includes comfortably furnished rooms from which employees can work remotely. Based on my own experience, rooms were provided that included a table tennis table, and in which yoga classes were offered (during working hours).

The provider of the hotel search portal Trivago moved into its new headquarters in Düsseldorf's Medienhafen in 2018. This building includes catering and kitchen areas, fitness rooms, a library, a cinema, and a blue jogging track on the roof. Alternatively, employees can work from the terrace. One of the largest manufacturers of consumer goods, Unilever in Frankfurt am Main, shows that such concepts are not uncommon. These examples show how far companies are now prepared to go within the working context to respond to their employees. In addition, such buildings have an external impact, which is an important component of employer attractiveness.

The *candle problem* from psychology presents participants with a task, whereby group one receives a monetary reward if they solve the problem within a certain period, compared to group two, which is simply asked to solve the problem, with no time frame set¹⁰. In terms of leadership, characteristics of transactional leadership (group one) are contrasted with characteristics of transformational leadership or servant leadership (group two). The results show that group two is more likely to be able to solve the problem and is faster at doing so. This is an indication that creative solutions require a degree of self-determination and freedom for the solution seeker, which is the reason why modern companies rely on the concepts described here.

Accordingly, these companies need leaders who fit into such concepts. This corresponds to the need described in this paper, which is to be satisfied by a certain leadership style and which motivates companies to invest in the existence of a certain leadership style in their company. The need for practitioners for leadership that fits into such concepts has led to increased attention on transformational leadership among researchers.

As described, transformational leadership and servant leadership are similar in that the employee receives a great deal of attention as an individual. This level of attention goes beyond their development in the corporate context and also supports them in their development as individuals within their society. Servant leadership is more prevalent in this form than transformational leadership. The latter is more likely to find overlaps in personal goals and company goals and thus drive individual development as well as company development. Such small differences may be the reason why transformational

leadership has received more attention. In terms of employee orientation, transformational leadership also takes the company's goals into account on paper, whereas servant leadership sounds more like trusting that employees will return the favor or the investment made in them. This leaves room for the perceived level of investment received and the associated repayment of that investment.

The popularity of transformational leadership can be seen as one of the stronger influencing variables as to why the results, regarding the characteristics of a servant leader, are strongly oriented towards the middle, or the answer option (3) in-between. The concept of social desirability can be used to explain why leaders may point more towards servant leadership than employees identify their leaders. This refers to the fact that self-disclosure questions are answered in such a way that one's statements correspond less to real experience and behavior and more to social norms and expectations¹¹.

Limitations and Perspectives

The results reflect the assessments of individual employees and leaders. As a result, all statements may be accurate. A direct comparison between employees and their leaders who have been trained in servant leadership (or transformational leadership) would provide more insight into whether the perceptions are the same or different. It is expected that finding such pairs who are willing to rate these traits would require a great deal of effort. To make a general statement without having a direct correlation between employee and leader, it would be possible to consider a larger sample. It would also make sense to narrow down the industry, as not all industries benefit from the creativity described here. In some industries, it is necessary and appropriate to work through several steps. In such industries, the absence of servant leadership characteristics would be natural.

Further research could begin by identifying different industries in terms of the level of creativity required to accomplish tasks. One possible outcome of this could be to identify areas for improvement in which a higher level of creative problem-solving leads to better results.

Future research can focus on whether transformational leadership is an intermediate step to servant leadership, or whether servant leadership in its manifestation takes too little account of the organization because it is too preoccupied with the needs of other stakeholders.

Overall, leadership research has undergone a major transformation that is becoming more pronounced. The study of this discipline can continue to yield exciting insights that can help practitioners put them into practice.

Notes

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About the Author

Pascal Fabian loves to combine business administration and psychology, whereby one of the most exciting combinations can be found in leadership. Becoming more employee-focused is a great development in current leadership research.

In the process of obtaining PhD at the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Sofia (Bulgaria). Before, Master of Science as Psychologist for Industrial, Organizational and Business Psychology at Euro-FH, European University, Hamburg (Germany).

Interested in leadership concepts. Also interested in social development in the context of digitalization and increasing globalization. Especially from the perspective of organizations. How does our work life affect our personal lives, smaller groups, and whole societies?

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