REDUCING THE IMPACT OF GEOGRAPHIC DISPERSION ON THE PRACTICE OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

The Role of Technology in Leading from Afar

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Hermann Hesse's (1956) novel, *The Journey to the East*, serves as Greenleaf's (1970) inspiration for the concept of servant-leadership. In Hesse's novel, he describes the adventures of the League, a secretive group of both real life and fictional characters. A small element of the League departs from Europe on an eastward pilgrimage. While the other travelers are focused on their own reasons for embarking on this trek, Leo, introduced as the group's servant, happily embraces his role of carrying luggage, serving the travelers, performing menial tasks, and keeping the organization on track. Suddenly and without warning, Leo disappears from the group. With Leo absent, the group quickly dissolves and the mission fails. Much to the narrator's surprise, he later discovers that Leo was not the servant, rather the leader of the entire League. While Greenleaf (1970) astutely recognizes the impact

that a servant-leader may have on an organization, another aspect of servant-leadership presents itself in *The Journey to the East*: the impact of physical distance between the leader and the subordinate on organizational performance.

Leo's situation is one that modern day leaders routinely face as they are tasked with leading organizations domestically, and in a growing number of cases, internationally as well. While physical distance is an obvious challenge for leaders in companies operating internationally, many leaders in domestic firms face similar challenges as they establish operations across state lines. Most leadership theories do not explicitly address the issue of leader-follower proximity; however, the descriptive and prescriptive emphasis on leader-follower relationships guides a reader of these theories to the assumption that the leader is physically present and interacting with their followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Nelson, 2016; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; House, 1971). Given the emphasis placed on a leader's attentiveness to the concerns of his or her followers and the leader's natural desire to nurture their development, this is certainly the conclusion that one logically reaches when studying the seminal works in servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 1970; Keith, 2012; Spears, 1996). However, a review of the current servant-leadership literature reveals that there is a gap with regards to how physical distance will affect servant-leadership effectiveness. This led us to create the research question guiding this conceptual paper: how does physical distance effect a servant-leader's ability to positively impact the performance of his or her organization?

The purpose of the present manuscript is to address this gap in the servant-leadership literature and identify a means by which servant-leaders can effectively deal with the challenges posed by physical distance between the leader and his or her subordinates. We center our discussion on the interaction effects of unified communications solutions, which have been associated with improved organizational efficiencies and a more effective dissemination of information across the organization (Fikry, Ghani, & Mukhtar, 2012; Williams & LaBrie, 2015).

The remainder of our paper is arranged as follows. First, we briefly review the current literature on servant-leadership and organizational performance and then use this understanding to develop theory-based propositions linking the two constructs. Next, we provide theory-based propositions assessing the interaction effects of physical distance and Unified Communication Solutions (UCS) on the servant-leadership – organizational performance relationship. Of particular importance, we introduce UCS as an important component of a three-way interaction effect that offers a theoretical rationale by which servant-leaders can effectively utilize these technologies to mitigate the negative influence of physical distance. Finally, we elaborate on these propositions to provide a more targeted direction for future research in this area. The conceptual three-way interaction model guiding this study is depicted in Figure 1.
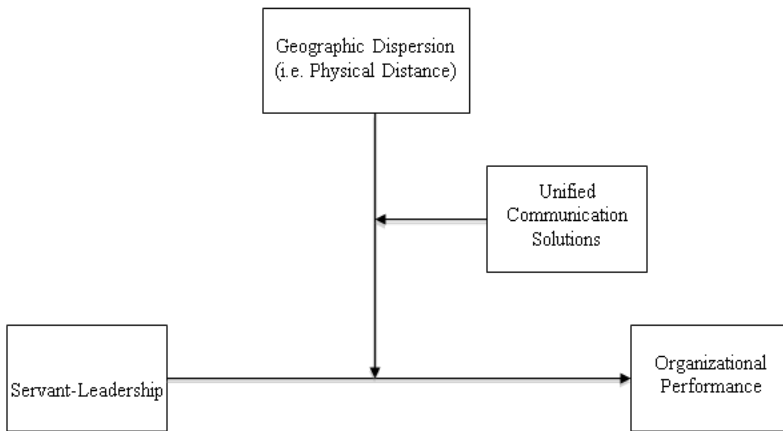
Figure 1. A three-way interaction effect on the servant-leadership – organizational performance relationship.

Our model operates under the assumption that increasing the physical distance between the leader and follower will weaken the impact of servant-leadership on organizational performance. Additionally, we acknowledge that UCS may never fully mitigate the impact of physical distance but can reduce its negative influence such that the practice of servant-leadership continues yielding positive organizational results in a geographically dispersed context.

THEORY AND PROPOSITION DEVELOPMENT
Foundations of Servant-Leadership

The modern formation of servant-leadership can be attributed to Robert Greenleaf's (1970) seminal writings, *The Servant as Leader.* A servant-leader is characterized as a leader who wants to serve others as his or her primary motivation for leading. According to Greenleaf (1970), leadership "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first"

(p. 6). This service to others can be defined as ensuring that their legitimate needs are met and the followers are allowed ample opportunities to grow. Greenleaf's servant-leaders are in sharp contrast with, as he calls them, those who identify as "leaders first." These "leader first" individuals are driven to acquire power not for the benefit of others, but for material gain and a personal drive for power (Greenleaf, 1970).

Although Greenleaf promoted the idea and practice of servant-leadership, he never gave a formal definition of what exactly servant-leadership was. It has been argued that Greenleaf purposefully did not provide a specific definition because he viewed servant-leadership as an inward, life-long journey in which one's personal definition changes over the course of an individual's life (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Laub (1999) was one of the first to offer a possible definition after conducting one of the earliest, comprehensive literature reviews of the then current state of servant-leadership theory. Laub (2004) later refined his initial definition to state:

> Servant-leadership is an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. Servant-leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization and those served by the organization. (p. 8)

While Laub's (2004) definition has some support in the servant-leadership community, Greenleaf's idea that a concrete definition is unnecessary appears to be widely accepted given that scholars have quit attempting to come up with a universal definition of the construct. Instead of defining servant-leadership, other studies focus on describing the characteristics of servant-leadership (Beck, 2014; Keith, 2012; Russell & Stone, 2002), with the general idea being that it is relatively easy to identify servant-leadership in practice even though servant-leadership lacks a universally accepted definition (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Laub (1999), besides attempting to define servant-leadership, was one of the first to describe servant-leader behaviors and characteristics. Laub developed six different aspects of servant-leader characteristics based on his empirical research. Russell and Stone (2002) developed their own theory of servant-leadership consisting of nine functional attributes and 11 accompanying attributes. Barbuto (2006) attempted to refine the servant-leadership construct by developing a five-factor model from eleven potential servant-leadership characteristics. Meanwhile, Wong, Davey, and Church (2007) developed a five-factor model of servant-leader behavior that was based more on the servant-leader's motivations and identity rather than his or her actions. By the end of 2010, there were numerous models, each with a unique vernacular, attempting to describe what servant-leadership looked like, leading to confusion in the academic community over which factors to use (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

In an effort to summarize these competing conceptualizations of servant-leadership, Van Dierendonck (2011) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of the current frameworks available, synthesizing the literature into a model comprised of six key characteristics: empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) later developed a multidimensional measurement instrument to capture these essential elements of servant-leadership. Presently, several multidimensional measurement instruments exist, affording future researchers ample opportunities with which to test the theory's complexity and underlying foundation (Liden et al., 2015; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

Servant-Leadership and Organizational Performance

When Greenleaf (1970) penned the modern idea of servant-leadership, it was meant primarily to improve the life of the follower. If the leader puts the concerns and legitimate needs of the follower above his or her own, then the follower should "become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" (p. 6). This implies that as the individual's health, intellect, and freedom improve, the individual becomes more productive and effective within the organization.

Servant-leadership, by definition, calls for a focus on the legitimate needs and well being of others (Greenleaf, 1970;

Laub, 2004; Laub, 1999; Russell & Stone, 2002). Thus, servant-leaders readily subordinate their own desires to serve the genuine needs, or essential requirements, of followers (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008). Legitimate needs are not simply an individual's wants and desires; rather they are necessities that will ultimately be for the good of the individual. In order to enhance subordinate well-being, servant-leaders seek to serve others and provide emotional healing (Beck, 2014; Greenleaf, 1970; Searle & Barbuto, 2010). For example, servant-leaders are empathetic and highly sensitive to the cares, concerns, and needs of their subordinates (Liden et al., 2008). Additionally, servant-leaders facilitate an open environment where followers feel free to voice their concerns (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Analysis of 15 separate empirical studies demonstrates the improving impact of servant-leadership on employee well-being and job satisfaction (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Employee well-being leads to increased performance at the organizational level (Taris & Schreurs, 2009). Research findings suggest that emotional healing, along with other aspects of servant-leadership, leads to positive behavior at the individual, group, and organizational levels, which increases all-around performance (Searle & Barbuto, 2010). As the values of servant-leadership are displayed, these values begin to positively influence the organization's culture, which serves as a guide confining the behavior of employees through shared norms held by members of an organization (Schein, 2010). Although aspects of an organization's culture have the potential to be either functional or dysfunctional,

servant-leaders are more apt to build functional cultures given that the process of culture creation begins with group formation determined by the leader; and, those groups are comprised of members who have been supported and mentored by leaders who value their subordinate's career development (Liden et al., 2008; Schein, 2010). By shaping the organization's culture, servant-leaders influence changes in employee attitudes and behavior, ultimately increasing organizational performance (Peterson, Galvin, & Lange, 2012; Russell & Stone, 2002).

Servant-leadership also improves organizational performance by affecting communication and trust. Servant-leadership requires increased trust between leader and subordinate and, as a result, requires leaders and managers to share information with and empower employees (Van Dierendonck, 2011). This claim is reinforced by empirical research. For instance, a study of 67 sales teams from a large South Korean cosmetics company revealed that servant-leadership creates a climate where information and knowledge is freely shared; furthermore, the sharing-climate developed by servant-leadership was directly related to sales team performance (Song, Park, & Kang, 2015). Additionally, communication, both verbal and nonverbal, helps the servant-leader to build affect-based trust, which leads directly to increased organizational performance (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011). Moreover, communicating clearly, along with fostering cooperation, providing accountability, supporting and resourcing, engaging in honest feedback, and valuing and appreciating, stands as an essential aspect of servant-leadership

and drives team effectiveness within organizations (Irving & Longbotham, 2007).

Additional research lends further credibility to servant-leadership's claim to improve organizational performance. For example, a systematic review of literature identified that servant-leadership was positively associated with team-level effectiveness (Parris & Peachey, 2013). A study, consisting of 126 CEOs from organizations in the software and hardware technology industries, found that the practice of servant-leadership was significantly and positively related to firm performance, which was measured by return on assets (Peterson et al., 2012). Servant-leaders were also found to be significantly more effective than non-servant-leaders at producing results in educational (Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson, & Jinks, 2007) and religious organizations (McCuddy & Cavin, 2008). Additionally, a study of over 300 employees of several banks found that servant-leadership was a key antecedent of team and organizational potency and performance (Hu & Liden, 2011).

The practice of servant-leadership helps leaders build serving cultures and communities while increasing the performance of their organizations. A study of over 900 employees in 71 chain restaurants established that the practice of servant-leadership creates a culture of service, which leads directly to improved organizational performance; moreover, the pervading culture of service was related to improvements in other aspects of the organization, such as reduced employee turnover and improved customer service behaviors (Liden,

Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014). Individual employees also showed improved performance and creativity (Liden et al., 2014). Furthermore, a study of highly performing, for-profit companies suggests that strategic-level servant-leadership develops lower-level servant-leaders and creates a culture of improved performance at the organizational level (Melchar & Bosco, 2010). In addition, servant-leaders create ethical work environments that increase employee and organizational performance (Jaramillo, Bande, & Varela, 2015; Schwepker & Schultz, 2015).

Servant-leadership also improves organizational performance by encouraging organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and helping cultures (Ebener & O'Connell, 2010; Ehrhart, 2004; Hu & Liden, 2011). OCB is defined as any behavior performed by an individual that is discretionary, not explicitly recompensed by an organizational reward system, that "in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization" (Organ, 1988, p. 4). Servant-leaders create helping and serving cultures, while structuring the organization to reinforce the prevalence of OCB (Ebener & O'Connell, 2010).

Empirical studies illustrate a strong positive association between OCB and increased organizational performance (Koys, 2001; Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997; Podsakoff & Mackenzie, 1994). A meta-analysis based upon 38 independent studies found that OCB is related to several organizational outcomes, namely increased productivity, increased efficiency, reduced costs, higher customer

satisfaction, and lower levels of employee turnover (Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009). Another meta-analysis illustrates a strong relationship between OCB and improved organizational performance (Nielsen, Hrivnak, & Shaw, 2009). Notably, evidence suggests a causal relationship between the OCBs and organizational effectiveness (Podsakoff et al., 2009).

In summary, we contend that servant-leadership leads to increased organizational performance by improving follower well-being through serving and providing emotional healing, building trust and improving communication, creating cultures and communities of service, and creating a climate that encourages organizational citizenship behaviors. As such, we put forth the following proposition:

Proposition 1: Servant-leadership is positively associated with increased organizational performance.

The Impact of Geographic Dispersion on the Servant-Leadership-Organizational Performance Relationship

Trust is one of the most important functional attributes of servant-leadership (Russell & Stone, 2002). Trust has been defined as the "willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that party" (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). Because of the other-centric focus of servant-leadership, the scale of leader vulnerability to other party's actions is higher than in other leadership styles. This makes trust even more relevant in the practice of servant-leadership. Furthermore, the above

definition highlights the importance of trust within any organization. Trust becomes especially important when the leader is not physically present and available to the follower, because increased physical distance makes building trust and cooperation more difficult (Mesly, 2015).

Perhaps the greatest determinant of trust is communication. Antonakis and Atwater (2002) propose "physical distance creates conditions that may not be conducive for leadership because it makes it difficult for leaders and followers to interact with each other" (p. 697). In a study of over 250 tax workers, the authors found a strong significant relationship between servant-leadership and trust, both at the leader and organizational level. Importantly, this relationship was heavily moderated by the level of organizational communication (Rezaei, Salehi, Shafiei, & Sabet, 2012). Without frequent and effective communication, it becomes increasingly difficult to build trust within organizations. Furthermore, it is impractical for a leader to strongly and fully convince others of his or her trustworthiness without direct communication and interaction (Fairholm, 1994). Giving credence to the importance of frequent interaction within organizations, a study comparing collocated and distributed teams found that spontaneous communication is vital to conflict resolution and organizational goal achievement; additionally, collocated teams, as a result of the ease and frequency of spontaneous communication, had lower levels of task and interpersonal conflict (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005).

Geographic dispersion is negatively associated with leader, member, and overall levels of intragroup communication. The

relationship between dispersion and communication is especially important because intragroup communication is positively related with group performance (Cummings, 2008). Physical distance clearly disrupts a leader's ability to frequently and informally communicate with subordinates, as well as the group members' ability to coordinate, cooperate, and communicate with each other. Moreover, distance reduces organizational performance by confining the ability to communicate and share knowledge (Song et al., 2015). Physical distance also serves as a possible organizational barrier that amplifies the difficulty for "servant-leaders to interact with others outside of their inner circle . . . [and] become so focused on accomplishing the goals of their small piece of the organization that they lose sight of the bigger picture" (Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011, p. 53).

Modeling and visibility are two important aspects of servant-leadership. While modeling refers to providing a personal example of desired behaviors, visibility is the public interactions of leaders with their subordinates (Russell & Stone, 2002). Cedar (1987) suggests "the effective servant-leader is highly visible in his leading and caring and comforting" (p. 109). Visibly modeling behaviors is the method through which serving cultures are built. When a servant-leader publicly showcases the behaviors he or she wants emulated and practices what he or she preaches, the servant-leader builds credibility and trust with other members of the organization. This trust and credibility leads to admiration, respect, and ultimately, adoption of the desired

behaviors (Liden et al., 2014). In order for leaders to adequately communicate their vision for the organization, they must first show that they are effective examples to follow (Taylor et al., 2007). Physical separation drastically inhibits a servant-leader's ability to be present and visible. If no subordinates are able to watch or interact with a leader modeling servant behavior, then the leader is not modeling at all; rather he or she is simply behaving.

While trust, communication, and visible modeling relate almost universally to leadership styles, community and culture building are aspects of few leadership approaches outside of servant-leadership (Boone & Makhani, 2012; Ebener & O'Connell, 2010; Laub, 2004; Melchar & Bosco, 2010; Spears, 1996; Turner, 2003). Physical distance impedes a servant-leader's ability to grow a sense of community. In a study comparing face-to-face teams with virtual teams, face-to-face teams scored much higher on cohesion and group synergy, which are both aspects of thriving communities (Balthazard, Waldman, & Atwater, 2007). Furthermore, frequent informal communication helps to reduce conflict and build the sense of shared identity that is necessary in organizational community (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005). Additionally, organizational gatherings help to renew shared vision, celebrate accomplishments, and reinforce a sense of community (Boone & Makhani, 2012). Dispersion, however, limits the frequency of communication and prevents collective gatherings due to its separative nature.

Servant-leaders instill a sense of community by recognizing

individual and team contributions as well as organizational successes through rewards (Boone & Makhani, 2012). Distance makes the public, or even private, recognition of a group or individual's accomplishments difficult. Perhaps more significantly, geographic separation upsets the servant-leader's ability to identify certain individual's contributions altogether. Sometimes within organizations, it is difficult to comprehend which employee did a given task and who deserves credit; this difficulty is only amplified over distance. Servant-leaders build culture and a sense of community directly, through encouraging desirable serving behaviors, and indirectly, by actually performing and modeling the serving behaviors of a servant culture (Liden et al., 2014). Since communication and modeling are more difficult when physically apart, distance makes building culture and community more difficult. Serving cultures are positively related to organizational effectiveness, but when a servant-leader is unable to build a strong service-oriented culture, the organization's performance is affected (Liden et al., 2014).

The cultures built by servant-leaders encourage the display of organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) (Ebener & O'Connell, 2010; Ehrhart, 2004; Hu & Liden, 2011). Servant-leaders set organizational citizenship norms with their behavior (Ebener & O'Connell, 2010). Without the leader present to display OCBs, the norm cannot be set. Another way servant-leaders encourage OCBs is through introducing a climate of procedural justice, which improves organizational performance by reinforcing OCBs (Ehrhart, 2004). An important aspect of

procedural justice is the consistent ability for employees to voice concerns and opinions; this ability cannot be consistently performed when physically separated. Just as physical distance is detrimental to building serving cultures, it reduces the servant-leader's ability to create the climate necessary to encourage OCBs.

Serving the legitimate needs of followers is an attribute of highest importance to servant-leadership. Indeed, service is the very foundation of servant-leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Beck, 2014; Greenleaf, 1970; Liden et al., 2008; Searle & Barbuto, 2010). Greenleaf (1970) claimed that the desire to serve is a requirement to be a servant-leader. Indubitably, physical separation through distance negatively affects a leader's ability to serve. This is evident in the story of Leo the servant-leader who, when separated from the group, could no longer carry luggage, provide words of wisdom, or raise morale with his winsome personality (Hesse, 1956). General Stanley McChrystal (2011), former Commander of US and International forces in Afghanistan, explained this attribute as the ability to build someone back up who had failed. McChrystal also described the immense difficulty he had performing this task with subordinates spread over 20 countries. After a failed mission, McChrystal had to "try to rebuild the trust of that force, rebuild their confidence—me and them, and them and me, and our seniors and us as a force—all without the ability to put a hand on a shoulder" (McChrystal, 2011). Rebuilding trust and helping employees heal emotionally are also critical tasks performed by corporate

leaders. For example, after TJX President and CEO Edmond English lost seven employees in the September 11th plane attacks on the World Trade Center, he provided grief counselors to employees, chartered planes from Canada and Europe for the family members of those lost so that they could travel to Massachusetts to be with others grieving and in need of counseling. Additionally, he gave employees the option to take some time off of work; yet, most employees opted to show up for work and support each other there (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002).

The ability to provide emotional healing requires an acute awareness of followers' concerns, feelings, and emotional state. Yukl (2006) contends, "servant-leaders must listen to followers, learn about their needs and aspirations, and be willing to share in their pain and frustration" (p. 420). Therefore, the struggle felt by McChrystal, and a myriad of other leaders of dispersed organizations, is wholly understandable; as physical distance increases between leader and follower, the leader's ability to know and interact with his followers, understand their feelings, and see their concerns is greatly diminished. Moreover, an important aspect of emotional healing is the subtle communication between the servant-leader and the follower, which suggests they are both searching for healing and wholeness (Greenleaf, 1970). Physical separation precludes the leader from communicating with the follower and expressing this important vulnerability.

In today's complex leadership environment, geographic dispersion adds yet another challenging variable to contend

with. It reduces servant-leader effectiveness and organizational performance by disrupting frequent and spontaneous interaction and trust-building, preventing the leader from being present and visible, complicating a sense of organizational community, frustrating the encouragement of OCBs, and is detrimental to the leader's ability to serve the legitimate needs of followers. Thus, we propose:

> *Proposition 2: Geographic dispersion negatively moderates the relationship between servant-leadership and organizational performance.*

Unified Communication Systems

One solution that organizations are adopting to mitigate the negative effect of physical distance in today's global business environment is Unified Communication Solutions. UCS is a field of technology that focuses on integrating multiple synchronous and asynchronous communication services into one networked and interoperable system to improve the dissemination of information, reduce operational costs, and improve worker efficiency (Beltran & Bertin, 2015; Fikry et al., 2012; Kabachinski, 2011). UCS, by its very nature, is not tied to one specific communication device/solution. Typical UCS can include mobile devices, videoconferences, instant messaging, speech recognition software, wikis, VOIP, as well as other digital telecommunication solutions (Burns, Craig, Friedman, Schott, & Senot, 2011; Tezcan, Von Rege, Henkson, & Oteng-Ntim, 2011; Wu & Wang, 2014). An example UCS scenario in the medical field might involve a receptionist inputting new patient information on a desktop computer,

which triggers an automatic text notification to receive the patient on the next available nurse's Smartphone, while the doctor reviews the patient's information on a tablet. Elements of a modern UCS are portrayed in Figure 2.
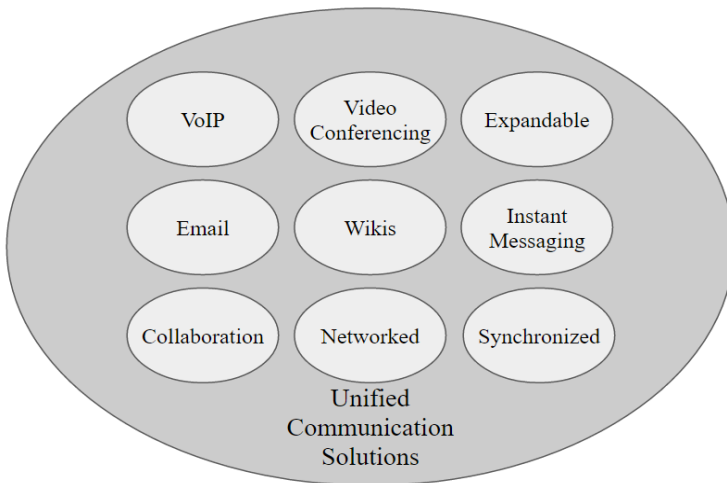

Figure 2. Elements of a Unified Communication Solutions.

UCS is a relatively new technology field that originated in the late 1990s when messaging applications and broadband Internet began to appear in the workplace (Burns et al., 2011; Fikry et al., 2012). The idea behind the development of UCS was to reduce the frustration and inefficiency of using multiple devices and networks in distributed collaboration environments (Beltran & Bertin, 2015). In order to reduce an organization's financial overhead, UCS adoption increased dramatically; 2011 saw the global UCS market rise to $22.8 billion with a market projection of $61.9 billion in 2018 (Williams & LaBrie, 2015).

It is important to reiterate that true UCS implies that there are numerous user terminals to both input and receive information; in an ideal world every member of an organization would have at least one device connected to the UCS network. This is perhaps the most defining feature of a true UCS. According to Metcalfe's Law, every additional device that is connected to a network not only increases the value of the overall network, but the value of the individual device as well (Kabachinski, 2011; Zhang, Liu, & Xu, 2015). For example, if a network only has two tablets, then each tablet can only communicate with each other via one connection. If the same network gets four additional networked tablets, there are now 15 total connections between the devices. In other words, because the tablet can communicate with more devices, the individual tablet is now overall more valuable and useful. A visual depiction of Metcalfe's Law is shown in Figure 3.
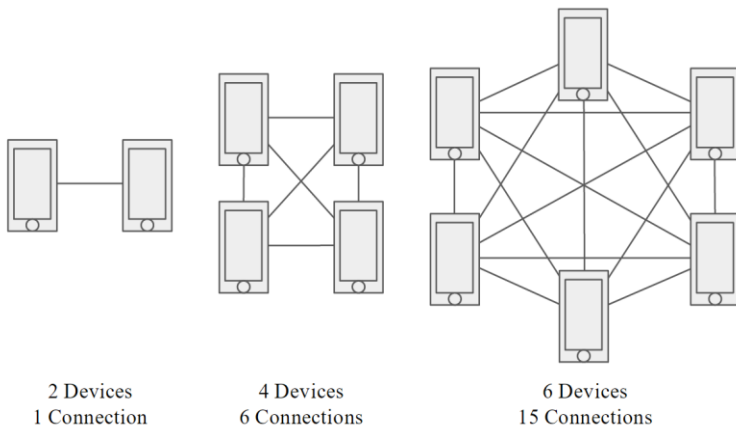

2 Devices
1 Connection

4 Devices
6 Connections

6 Devices
15 Connections

Figure 3. Illustration of Metcalfe's Law.

It is also important to understand that a true implementation of UCS requires the use of one single network and not several independent networks. Having a desktop computer network that does not directly tie into user's mobile communication devices would not be considered a true example of UCS. Not only does Metcalfe's Law stipulate that each device's value would be increased on a unified network, but separate networks create "Islands of Technologies" that can lead to serious long- and short-term issues (Kabachinski, 2011, p. 235). These islands of technology can lead to users wasting time re-entering the same information on multiple networks that are not synchronized, possibly leading to communication issues.

Benefits of UCS for Servant-Leaders

Organizations, regardless of their leadership style, have been shown to be more effective when UCS networks have been applied to their operation. UCS has been shown to reduce costs (Fikry et al., 2012; Kabachinski, 2011; Williams & LaBrie, 2015; Wu & Wang, 2014), improve organizational efficiency (Kabachinski, 2011; Williams & LaBrie, 2015; Wu & Wang, 2014), and increase information dissemination across the organization (Beltran & Bertin, 2015; Burns et al., 2011; Fikry et al., 2012; Tezcan et al., 2011). Servant-leaders, however, are uniquely equipped to leverage the benefits that UCS can provide to grow and develop their organizations. When servant-leaders leverage the capabilities of UCS, their ability to develop a sense of community and serve the legitimate needs of their followers is dramatically increased.

Development of a community. Servant-leadership places a strong emphasis on the building and development of a community (Boone & Makhani, 2012; Laub, 1999; Melchar & Bosco, 2010; Spears, 1996; Turner, 2003). Robert Greenleaf (1970) said that a community was a central pillar of servant-leadership and that without it "trust, respect, and ethical behavior are difficult for the young to learn and for the old to maintain" (p. 21). As stated in proposition two, physical distance has the negative effect of disrupting this community building. Whereas decades ago leaders were forced to accept the difficulties brought on by physical distance, today's servant-leaders can utilize the unique benefits of UCS to combat the negative impact of physical distance to reinforce community building within their organizations.

Improving the communication between members of an organization is perhaps the greatest way that servant-leaders can help build community in their organizations despite physical distance, which severely inhibits intergroup communication, leading to a decline in trust, efficiency, and OCBs. UCS, however, allows individual members of organizations to more effectively and efficiently communicate with each other by giving individuals more connectivity and access to digital communication networks (Fikry et al., 2012; Tezcan et al., 2011; Williams & LaBrie, 2015; Wu & Wang, 2014). Physical distance limits a servant-leader's ability to communicate with or access dispersed groups, however UCS provides all members with multiple, networked communication solutions accessible at all times. This increased connectivity

has been shown to improve OCBs, trust and group communication (Wu & Wang, 2014). By allowing group members to access the effective communication platforms, servant-leaders are helping to develop their organization's sense of community.

Servant-leaders utilizing UCS are also able to directly reward and recognize both individual and group accomplishments. The ability to recognize achievement has been shown to be an important factor in building communities (Boone & Makhani, 2012; Liden et al., 2014). Whereas traditional organizations rely on levels of leaders passing up what they view are achievements, UCS allows leaders to set personalized metrics to locate and highlight specific achievements across the entire organization. This is all possible because UCS networks allow users to access one consolidated database of information across its digital network (Beltran & Bertin, 2015; Burns et al., 2011). For example, a servant-leader could set a notification to inform them of any employee that scores 10 consecutive excellent customer service ratings. The leader can use this information to reward the achievement through a personalized phone call or e-mail. Besides encouraging desirable behaviors, these actions have the benefits of building follower loyalty and further developing the sense of community in an organization (Liden et al., 2014).

Serving the legitimate needs of followers. As illustrated in proposition two, physical distance greatly impedes perhaps the most unique aspect of servant-leadership—the ability to

serve the legitimate needs of followers and provide emotional healing. One way that UCS helps to mitigate the effects of distance is by providing multiple mediums through which leaders and followers can communicate. Channel, or medium, selection is a key aspect of UCS. Various factors including task, cultural differences, medium accessibility, and personal preferences influence channel selection (Shachaf, 2008). UCS allows servant-leaders to better communicate with and serve their followers by enabling the leaders to use the medium best suited to the situation and preferred by the follower. Channel selection is especially important because it may be possible for those served to not receive a communication attempt altogether (Tezcan et al., 2011). By using the medium or mediums that followers have access to and feel most comfortable with, followers and leaders will likely communicate more often and more effectively. As servant-leaders communicate more frequently with followers, they have positive exchanges and develop personal rapport with those followers, ultimately building trust and creating an open and safe working environment (Schaubroeck et al., 2011).

As leaders create a safe environment for followers to communicate professional and personal concerns, followers may provide a clearer picture of their needs (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Frequent communication with subordinates enhances a servant-leader's ability to perceive and address the plights and struggles of those subordinates (Beck, 2014). Additionally, the technology encompassed within UCS allows for the leader to better observe and interact with their teams

(Connaughton, Shuffler, & Goodwin, 2011). The ability to observe and interact from afar allows the servant-leader to pick up on subtle or overt cues, such as changes in writing styles via email, nonverbal cues over video feeds, or a strained voice on the phone. Servant-leaders, concerned with follower well being and the physical and emotional state of subordinates, can act upon the cues gained through UCS to serve followers and provide necessary emotional healing (Parris & Peachey, 2013; Yukl, 2006). By quantitatively and qualitatively increasing communication across great distances, UCS significantly enhances the servant-leader's ability to serve the legitimate needs of the follower. Therefore, we postulate:

> *Proposition 3: The three-way interaction between servant-leadership, geographic dispersion, and Unified Communication Solutions weakens the moderating effect of geographic dispersion such that servant-leaders who utilize Unified Communication Solutions when they are physically distant from their subordinates maintain a positive impact on organizational performance.*

DISCUSSION

Over the past 40 years, servant-leadership has continued to gain its fair share of both praise and criticism. While servant-leadership has been criticized as being ungrounded theoretically, too idealistic, and impractical (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Wong et al., 2007), proponents have suggested that its ethical focus on the development of

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organizational subordinates contributes to servant-leadership as a feasible leadership theory (Graham, 1991; Laub, 2004; Parris & Peachey, 2013). A growing body of empirical evidence continues to associate servant-leadership with positive organizational outcomes (Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009; Liden et al., 2014; Peterson et al., 2012; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Building on prior literature, the current manuscript provided a theoretical rationale for the positive relationship between servant-leadership and organizational performance.

In addition to being regarded as a viable organizational leadership theory, servant-leadership is viewed as being applicable across multiple cultures, organizational settings, and contexts (Parris & Peachey, 2013). However, one context that has not been considered is one in which the servant-leader is geographically dispersed from his or her subordinates. In this paper, we provided a theoretical basis suggesting that distance impedes the servant-leader's effectiveness. To overcome this, we introduced UCS as a feasible means by which servant-leaders may mitigate the negative effects of being geographically dispersed and continue to build trust, rapport with followers, as well as a sense of community (Schaubroeck et al., 2011).

According to our model, it appears that there are two potential solutions for geographically dispersed servant-leaders who wish to maintain high levels of organizational performance. The first option would be to reduce the physical distance between the leader and his or her followers. However,

this option may be impractical. As organizations broaden their operational presence in a global economy, leaders must endure the hardship of increased physical distance if they want to gain and maintain a competitive advantage.

The second option would be to find some means to mitigate the effects of physical distance. We contend that servant-leaders are uniquely equipped to capitalize on the benefits of UCS to overcome the distance effect. Additionally, we acknowledge that UCS is not the only solution available to servant-leaders. Other options include utilizing distance learning employee development programs, travelling more often to increase the amount of face-to-face time they have with followers, or creating leader development programs where leaders are trained at one central location before becoming physically distant. However, UCS may deliver the best value and the most benefit at a relatively low cost when compared to other options.

Among the biggest and most visible issues with adopting a UCS is the initial cost of the systems, as well as the difficulty in transferring from legacy systems to the UCS. While it is not feasible to give a quote for an implementation cost of a UCS system due to the many factors involved, we can look at recent companies and ascertain what they paid for UCS adoption. Small to medium sized business can expect to spend between $200 and $1,000 in up front costs per employee (8x8, 2012; Osterman Research, 2010; Wu & Wang, 2014). While the upkeep costs are substantially cheaper than the initial investment, the servant-leader must make the assessment to

determine if the new technology makes a significant positive impact on organizational performance.

Another major obstacle to UCS adoption is not as easy to quantify. Decision-making leaders in organizations may simply be unwilling to invest their follower's or their personal time transitioning into new technology systems (Fikry et al., 2012; Williams & LaBrie, 2015; Wu & Wang, 2014). By failing to fully explore the advantages specific to UCS, the servant-leader may be choosing to ignore a potential advantage due to a perceived difficulty. Future research is needed to identify managerial barriers to adoption of UCS within the organization. Additionally, future research is needed to identify what specific UCS options best meet the needs of geographically dispersed leaders. Once identified, researchers should identify best practices for implementation and use of new technologies to aid in communication and development of followers.

Limitations

Perhaps the greatest limitation of this model is that there is very little comparative work on this subject matter with regards to servant-leadership. Consequently, much of this model rests on logical and theoretical perspectives, instead of empirical data. As the study of servant-leadership progresses, we hope to correct this limitation and replace a theoretical model with an empirical one.

An additional limitation of our model is the lack of specificity with respect to which aspects of UCS may be the

most important for servant-leaders to look for when selecting a system. Because UCS can encompass all of the capabilities and mediums identified in Figure 2, we do not know which features, besides the interoperable connected digital network, give the servant-leader the most benefit. Additionally, because technology is also constantly changing, we purposefully did not want to prescribe specific capabilities or brands that could soon become obsolete.

Future Research

This paper suggests relationships between UCS, physical distance, servant-leadership, and organizational performance. In order to validate the claims made in this paper, empirical studies are required to bridge the gap between theory and practice. While there is some research on leadership in dispersed teams (Joshi, Lazarova, & Liao, 2009), distance and organizational performance (Howell, Neufeld, & Avolio, 2005), and on technology and distance (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998); virtually no empirical studies have been conducted on distance's effect on the relationship between servant-leadership and organizational performance. A longitudinal study comparing servant-led organizations, some of which are dispersed and some that are collocated, would be extremely valuable to the field of servant-leadership. Moreover, studies between dispersed servant-led organizations that use differing levels or amounts of technology, from traditional e-mail to full UCS implementation, would help to further legitimize the third proposition in this paper.

Another important area of future study should focus on specific technologies. UCS encompasses a wide variety of different technology mediums, including VoIP, email, video conferencing, instant messaging, and a host of others. Unfortunately, there are few studies that show the impact of certain communication technologies and even fewer that show the impact of specific combinations of technology mediums. Empirical research illustrating the effects of certain mediums or combinations of mediums would prove highly beneficial to the knowledge of UCS and how it might be used to reduce the negative effects of being geographically dispersed.

Given the complexity of servant-leadership and UCS, using a mixed methods approach to examine the proposed relationships might be advantageous. For example, a quantitative survey could allow a researcher to uncover which combination of technologies servant-leaders use most frequently in a UCS, while a qualitative approach could allow the researcher to ascertain answers to how or why those technologies are most effective. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods would allow researchers to gain insights with one method that may not be available with the other (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003).

Our manuscript has focused on the direct relationship between servant-leadership and organizational performance, and the manner by which physical distance and UCS may alter/influence this relationship. We note that there are a number of antecedents to organizational performance beyond leadership style. For example, evidence suggests that

organizational performance is influenced by strategic consensus among a firm's top executives, power relationships, and diversity within the top management team (Dess, 1987; Glick, Miller, & Huber, 1993; Smith, Houghton, Hood, & Ryman, 2006). Additionally, managerial characteristics such as gender and executive tenure also influence performance within an organization (Davis, Babakus, Englis, & Pett, 2010; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990). Thus, to isolate the effect of leadership style (i.e., servant-leadership) on organizational performance, one would need to control for these extraneous variables in an empirical study.

CONCLUSION

Bass (1990) contends that physical proximity and open channels of communication are essential to effective leadership. Yet, today's global environment and increasing number of virtual work arrangements has placed leaders in a position to assume responsibilities of leading effectively while being physically separated from their subordinates (Neufeld, Wan, & Fang, 2008). As such, geographic dispersion has become an increasingly important challenge for servant-leaders as they attempt to build communities and serve the highest priority needs of their subordinates from afar.

Servant-leaders add value to their organizations by helping to increase organizational performance. While these leaders are important in any organization, the impact of distance and dispersion can be detrimental to their effectiveness. Physical distance disrupts a leader's ability to practice servant-

leadership and build trust within the organization. As illustrated in our model, UCS helps to reduce this impact by allowing servant-leaders to effectively build the sense of community in their organizations while better serving the legitimate needs of their followers. We hope that our model inspires other researchers to continue addressing the challenges of being a servant-leader that is physically separated from his or her subordinates. Additionally, we hope that researchers will be inspired to build and test new models that uncover other means of mitigating the negative effects of geographic dispersion.

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