



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND SELF-TRANSCENDENCE IN A SPIRITUAL ORGANIZATION

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I grew up in the African American Baptist Church. It was there that I would first learn about servant-leadership, although I did not know about Robert Greenleaf or the theory of servant-leadership. What I did know about servant-leadership was from the Holy Bible. Jesus was the ultimate servant-leader, and I saw servant-leadership in action through my Mother. I wrote about my Mother's servant-leadership in my book, *Bloom Where You Are Planted: Reflections on Servant Leadership* when I said,

My mom is a servant-leader. Granted, she didn't know about Robert Greenleaf or the other great scholars of today, such as DePree, Senge, Covey, Wheatley, Autry, and many other popular writers who teach servant leadership. She just worked in the church, in her family, at her job, and in her community as servant-leader. I saw first-hand as a child how she worked first as a cook at our local county jail, preparing food for the inmates. After 30 years and being promoted to the Food Service Director, she showed great care and concern for the preparation of the food for the inmates of the jail. She abhorred people's opinions that prisoners should be glad that they can even eat. She fried her famous chicken and would sneak some



to the prisoners; even the jailers would come up to the kitchen and beg for a piece. Although a stern woman, she had a heart of gold, and the prisoners knew it.

They felt it.

It was the same way with her work in the church. I have lost count of the number of church dinners that I helped in cooking and preparing. They knew my mom would present and serve the food to the people with the utmost professionalism, love, and care. And everyone loved my mom's cooking.

I was reminded of this childhood experience as I was reading Juana Bordas' article, *Pluralistic Reflections on Servant Leadership* (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 1998), where she said, "Many women, minorities, and people of color have long traditions of servant leadership in their cultures. Servant leadership has ancient roots in many of the indigenous cultures - cultures that were holistic, cooperative, communal, intuitive, and spiritual. These cultures centered on being guardians of the future and respecting the ancestors who walked before.

This was my Mother's life. This is what she taught by example. (Davis, 2018, p. 136)

So began my life as a servant-leader.

Fast forward to my doctoral journey. Two questions came up for me as I thought about self-transcendence and servant-leadership in a spiritual setting. Davis (2014) asked:

1. Could self-transcendence help improve a leader's servant-leadership behavior?



2. Could spirituality (self-transcendence) alter a leader's perception of his or her servant-leadership behavior? (p. 44)

These questions led me on a life-expanding journey as I wrote my dissertation, and I continued to grow as a servant-leader.

ROBERT GREENLEAF AND SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

For four decades, servant-leadership was an explored philosophy used as a leadership style for organizations in business, industry, the education sector, and in various church denominations (McEachin, 2011). The seminal works of Robert K. Greenleaf established servant-leadership in 1977 from a different perspective than other leadership theories (Ruiz et al., 2010). Spears' (2002) thorough review of Greenleaf's (1977) writings provided ten characteristics of servant-leadership: (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) awareness, (e) persuasion, (f) conceptualization, (g) foresight, (h) stewardship, (i) building community, and (j) commitment to the growth of the follower. Servant-leaders guide their actions for the best common good of the employee and the organization (Ruiz et al., 2010).

Greenleaf explored the leader as a servant and postulated that the servant-leader is searching and listening, always hopeful for something better. An attitude of service is critical to leadership in Greenleaf's view. To practice silence and have openness to uncertainty is necessary for the servant-leader. A deep sense of empathy and tolerance of imperfection in people is also important to the servant-leader (Greenleaf, 1977). One characteristic of a servant-leader is to bridge the gap with his or her sense of intuition and develop a high level of trust in the people served. A leader who exemplifies servant-leadership can then see the growth of servant-leadership in the people served (Greenleaf, 1977). If the people served are wiser, freer, and healthier, the leader is practicing servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 1977).



Simultaneously, the Servant-Leader holds a deep interest in consciousness, religiosity, morality, value-laden ethics, and spirituality (Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Wilson, 2008). This spans the organizational (Marques, 2012), educational (Flannery, 2012; Fleming, 2004; Kernochan et al., 2007) and religious settings (McEachin, 2011). It may appear a journey to find meaning and purpose through self-transcendence (Chen, 2010; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Fleming, 2004; Narayanasamy, 2007; Piedmont & Leach, 2002; Sanzo, 2009) may end unnecessary suffering. The Dalai Lama (1999) recognized the universal desire for people to obtain happiness and to avoid suffering. The absence of suffering is one aspect of self-transcendence, as is inner discipline and healthy self-restraint (Dalai Lama, 1999).

In addition to servant-leadership behavior, self-transcendence may be a way in which people can end suffering and connect to self and find greater meaning and purpose in their lives (Leary & Guadagno, 2011; Piedmont, Ciarrochi, Dy-Liacco, & Williams, 2009; Sanzo, 2009). Frankl (2006) believed that people searched for meaning in both life and suffering. Researchers throughout history described and explored self-transcendence (Florczak, 2010; Sanzo, 2009) and in various cultures (Piedmont, Werdel, & Fernando, 2009). Yalom (1980) confirmed human beings desire meaning in their lives, and without meaningful goals, values, or ideals, people live in day-to-day distress.

THE PROBLEM

I had been a member of New Thought Spiritual Centers for about five years by the time I started writing my dissertation and worked on the local and national levels in the church organization. I learned quite a bit about myself, the New Thought movement's Science of Mind (SOM) philosophy, and about the organization and its leaders.



Many of my papers and assignments revolved around this church organization, the things I saw, the leadership I observed, what worked, and what could be improved upon. It was these observations that guided the research questions I tried to answer. But first, the problem as I saw it...

Newport (2010) acknowledged about 80% of churches in North America are experiencing a decline or are stagnant concerning church growth. Moreover, each year, approximately 3,500 churches close (Burton, 2010). Leaders in the church are debating the effect that senior ministers have on church organizational growth (Barna, 1999). The general problem is that churches in North America are not growing; in fact, church attendance is declining (Newport, 2010). The specific problem is that although New Thought Spiritual Centers has aggressive organizational growth goals (Centers for Spiritual Living, 2012), there is a lack of data on the type of leadership styles and behavior necessary for organizational growth.

This research served as a benchmark study of the senior ministers' self-transcendence and servant-leadership behaviors. Since the organization's inception nearly 80 years ago, there has been no empirical process for data collection to measure leadership styles and behavior. The lack of understanding leadership behaviors and organizational growth has resulted in senior ministers' and the executive leadership's inference that many of the New Thought Spiritual Centers remain stagnant because of leadership challenges. Chaves et al. (1999) argued that church size determination is difficult, and from inference, the authors believed that the average New Thought church has 100 members or less. New Thought Spiritual Centers may not be able to successfully meet its vision to "Create a world that works for everyone" (Centers for Spiritual Living, 2012, para. 1) without verifiable empirical data on its leadership styles and leadership behavior.



THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Greenleaf (1977) noted the vision for servant-leadership in the novel, *Journey to the East* by Herman Hesse (1956). Other researchers (McEachin, 2011; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002) later proclaimed that Jesus the Christ served as a true and authentic servant-leader. A review of the literature illustrated other examples of leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi, and Lao Tzu (Cerff, 2004; Wilson, 2008), who exemplified servant-leadership.

Their examples provided the following two questions that guided the study:

RQ1. Is there a relationship between leaders' perceived servant-leadership, as reported by the laity using the Servant Leadership Behavior Scale, and leaders' perceived self-transcendence, as self-reported using the Assessment of Spirituality and Religious Sentiments Scale?

RQ2. Is there a relationship between leaders' self-assessment of servant-leadership behavior and a self-assessment of their self-transcendence?

THE SURVEY SCALES

After an extensive period of research and thought, I decided on two surveys that would help glean insight into self-transcendence and servant-leadership behaviors; Piedmont's (1999) Assessment of Spirituality of Religious Sentiments Scale (ASPIRES) Self-Transcendence (ASPIRES ST) survey and Sendjaya et al.'s (2008) Servant Leadership Behavior Scale (SLBS) survey were valid measures for the variables under investigation (Davis, 2014, pp. 27-28). I chose Piedmont's (1999) ASPIRES ST scale because I liked the subscales of Prayer Fulfillment, Universality, and Connectedness. These terms and their meanings were very much in



alignment with the teachings of SOM but are not limited to the New Thought Movement or even any religious denomination.

Researchers, such as Murphy and Ellis (1996) and MacIntyre (1984), demonstrated the need for an inclusive and comprehensive worldview having ethics as its foundation (Dalai Lama, 1999). Fairholm (1998), along with Greenleaf (1977) and Mitroff and Denton (1999), agreed with the argument that spiritual beliefs or self-transcendence are critical to servant-leadership. These worldviews do not need to rely on scripture alone (Wallace, 2006).

The ASPIRES ST scale provides structural and predictive validity that is generalizable in religious settings and many cultures (Goodman et al., 2005; Piedmont, 2001; Piedmont, 2007; Piedmont & Leach, 2002). Second, Piedmont developed the ASPIRES to capture a person's experience of finding meaning within the context of the Five-Factor Model to represent non-redundant aspects of spirituality within the model's personality domains (Piedmont, 2001). Finally, ASPIRES is a nondenominational scale that is relevant to a broad representation of faith beliefs, including non-religious and agnostic believers (Piedmont, 2001). SOM represents people who came from numerous faith traditions.

The SLBS is a 35-item, 5-point Likert-type scale which measures six-dimensions of servant-leadership: Voluntary Subordination, Authentic Self, Covenantal Relationship, Responsible Morality, Transcendental Spirituality, and Transforming Influence (Sendjaya et al., 2008). These subscales measured each dimension and reflected characteristics of servant-leadership as described in the literature. Higher scores suggested the individual endorses a higher level of the specific dimension listed. The SLBS was constructed from interviews of 15 senior executives at for-profit and nonprofit institutions in Australia. Data from the interviews were compiled and categorized, and, using a quasi-statistical approach, the contextual



data were converted to quantitative data in each of the thematic categories. Expert validation of the scale produced a coefficient average of .81, followed by a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) among 277 graduate students (Sendjaya et al., 2008).

THE PARTICIPANTS

Instead of using just one church for the study, I reached out to the national headquarters (through letters of invitation, listserv, national conference, and email) and included as many ministers and practitioners that would participate from the 400 churches within New Thought Spiritual Centers. The basis for obtaining the appropriate sample size to detect a significant relationship was a power of .80, a medium effect size, and an alpha set at .05 (Bartlett et al., 2001; Cohen, 1988; Cohen, 1992). More recent guidance (Baguly, 2004) and use of G*Power 3.1.6 power analysis software indicated a sample size between 115 and 134 senior ministers were required, and I decided upon 130. I also wanted to include two lay leaders from each participating church to rate the 130 ministers, since the ministers were rating themselves, which produced a target of 390 participants. This study design employed a convenience sampling method due to cost and time constraints. Each participant signed an Informed Consent and was provided instructions on the first page of the survey via the internet service Survey Monkey. After data collection, the final participation included Senior Ministers Sample (N = 43) and Follower Sample (N = 126), for a total of 169 participants.

WHAT THE LITERATURE SAID

The review of the literature began with five approaches to leadership: servant-leadership, principled-centered leadership, soulful leadership, spiritual leadership, and shared leadership. My



intention was to provide theory comparisons, theory support, theory criticism, and an overview of spirituality in the first part of the review. Next, I reviewed the literature first to frame spirituality and then to discuss the difference between connecting spirituality and servant-leadership. Finally, I looked at servant-leadership from a worldview.

Worldview and Servant-Leadership

Wallace (2006) presented a comprehensive review of the five major world religions and their alignment to servant-leadership. Although comprehensive in respect to comparisons and contradictions of servant-leadership to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, no mention was made of spiritual philosophies as aligned with the New Thought Movement, namely, Science of Mind (Holmes, 1966). The contention of Wallace (2006) was the Judeo-Christian tradition most closely aligns with servant-leadership based on the seven components of human dignity: personal responsibility, character, community, the use of power, compassion, stewardship, and justice. However, Wallace's (2006) assessment of the seven components can align with theories and theorists outside the realm of scripture and give credence to the idea that a philosophy, such as Science of Mind, is inclusive of a worldview. Science of Mind provides cohesive perspective and unity, provides a foundation for ethical choices, collective consciousness, and serves as a philosophic foundation for the servant-leadership theory. What matters is that the servant-leader possesses a worldview that promotes those seven components (Murphy & Ellis, 1996).

Wallace's (2006) argument aligning Buddhism's values with Patterson's (2003) virtues approach to servant-leadership is noteworthy. Kriger and Seng's (2005) substantiation of Patterson's (2003) notions of the immeasurable states of mind, love,



compassion, joy, and equanimity appeared to be consistent with the values of servant-leadership. Of the five major religions that Wallace reviewed, Buddhism seems more compatible with servant-leadership and aligns with the values of Science of Mind in its emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life. It is with great awareness that Wallace argued, rather than linking servant-leadership to a specific religion, servant-leadership undergirds a comprehensive worldview providing a stronger philosophic foundation—leaving room for the spiritual philosophy of Science of Mind.

Murphy and Ellis (1996) agreed and explained how a comprehensive worldview unifies philosophy and science. The authors proposed that ethics, theology, and values should be on an equal playing field with science so that they are viewed as something more authentic than “social epoch” (Wallace, 2006, p. 15). The lack of a unified worldview, they argued, had crippled Western thought for centuries. Wallace (2006) posed the question of why leaders should practice servant-leadership over any other theory and answered that servant-leadership is more than a theory; rather, servant-leadership is an archetype that governs one’s existence.

Wallace (2006) believed servant-leadership represents leadership at its core. “Because it affirms human dignity, increases the bond of community by fostering compassion and attention to people’s needs, empowers people and helps them develop character, moderates and critiques the use of power and provides an environment that promotes justice” (p. 16). Science of Mind aligns with Wallace’s broad definition of worldview and servant-leadership. In this manner, the philosophy of Science of Mind can take its rightful place as an inclusive worldview to teach the values of servant-leadership through, as Wallace (2006) said, being rather than merely doing.



Theory Connecting Spirituality and Servant-Leadership

The theories of servant-leadership and spiritual leadership have overlapping areas; however, differences exist in the realm of organizational commitment. Patterson (2003) argued for a virtuous construct of servant-leadership based upon *agapao* love, which she defined as a socially or morally based perspective as the primary construct of servant-leader behavior. Patterson (2003) perceived humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service as attributes. In Fry's (2003) spiritual leadership theory, *altruistic love* involves harmony and a sense of completeness with oneself and other people. Patterson (2003) and Fry (2003) essentially agreed that servant-leadership and spiritual leadership exemplify the same behaviors. The difference in these theories is empowerment, which is an attribute in the theories of servant-leadership and transformational leadership but is not in Fry's (2003) spiritual leadership theory.

Throughout the literature, the conceptualization of spirituality and servant-leadership behavior occurs in various ways. Several studies revealed a relationship between servant-leadership and spirituality, and some did not. Sendjaya and Pekerti (2010) supported a relationship between a leaders' spirituality and servant-leader behaviors, as did other scholars (Beazley, 2002; Beazley & Gemmill, 2005; Dent et al., 2005; Liden et al., 2008; Reave, 2005; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Stupak & Stupak, 2005). Herman's (2008) research found a positive correlation between servant-leadership and workplace spirituality, defined as a way to provide meaning, purpose, and community. Spirituality aligns with individual and organizational values, and it respects integrating the whole person to create a space for humans to develop optimally (Herman, 2008). However, Weinstein (2011) concluded after a quantitative correlational study, and no relationship existed between a person's faith (or development



of faith) and perceived servant-leader behaviors among leaders in a government organization.

The literature also revealed perceptions from researchers that criticized servant-leadership. Feminist-scholar Eicher-Catt (2005) interpreted the discourse of servant-leadership through the lens of feminist deconstruction. Eicher-Catt argued that although servant-leadership seems to promote a moral and spiritual effect on organizational environment and culture, a meticulous investigation revealed servant-leadership upholds androcentric patriarchal norms and serves political ends. Eicher-Catt believed in the negation of servant-leadership's revolutionary potential, which cannot "advance genderless leadership" (p. 17). Servant-leadership did not create a new idea or message about leadership or organizational culture but prescribed ethics immersed in religious ideology. Eicher-Catt argued servant-leadership is a myth appealing to universality, but only reproduces a status quo that perpetuates the interest of a few and holds fast everyone else to its principles.

The literature search revealed evidence of a gap in the literature about servant-leadership; however, the gap was most evident regarding the subject of self-transcendence. The specific gap related to how followers viewed their leaders as possessing qualities of self-transcendence and servant-leadership behavior. Fairholm (1998), along with Greenleaf (1977) and Mitroff and Denton (1999), agreed with the argument that spiritual beliefs or self-transcendence are critical to servant-leadership.

THE RESULTS

Having met all the requirements of the IRB, I began my data collection and was learning while "on the job" what it means to be a Servant-Leader. I was met with navigating a journey I had never taken, and I learned even more about my beloved organization and



our leadership. As a researcher, one realizes that what you intend to study is one thing; however, what participants share along the way (related to the study and not related) provides a more comprehensive picture and profound insight. I was learning that there were plenty of Servant-Leaders in our organization, and yet we had a *lot* of room to grow in this philosophy. Results from the study also indicated that self-transcendence development could help senior ministers with their servant-leadership behavior in leading their organizations.

This study sought to examine whether a leader's self-transcendence, as measured by the Assessment of Spirituality of Religious Sentiments Scale (ASPIRES), correlates with being recognized as a servant-leader among one's laity as measured by the Servant Leadership Behavior Scale (SLBS). In other words, is self-transcendence a prerequisite? There is no instrument currently available that measures both self-transcendence and the properties of servant-leadership. Hypothetically, spiritual transcendence represents a fundamental, inherent quality of the individual. ASPIRES considers self-transcendence as a motivational construct that informs a person's ability to create personal meaning for one's life. However, servant-leadership is a management theory, and the SLBS measures six dimensions: Voluntary Subordination, Authentic Self, Covenantal Relationship, Responsible Morality, Transcendental Spirituality, and Transforming Influence (Sendjaya et al., 2008).

The conclusions extrapolated from research question 1 suggested there was a significant positive correlation between self-transcendence and servant-leadership behavior. The strongest correlations were between self-transcendence under ASPIRES with responsible morality of the SLBS ($r_s = .50, p < .001$), and self-transcendence with the SLBS measure of transforming influence ($r_s = .48, p < .001$). Dr. Ralph Piedmont, who authored the ASPIRES survey, found during its validation that those who endorse high



levels of self-transcendence tend to find a meaning for life that is broader than an immediate sense of time and place. Sendjaya et al. (2008), who authored the SLBS, found from its validation that servant-leaders who score high on responsible morality take a stand on moral principles and emphasize doing what is right rather than focus on outer appearance. Servant-leaders scoring high on responsible morality use morally justified means to achieve appropriate ends encourages laity to engage in principled reasoning and enhance righteous action from laity (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Servant-leaders who score high on transforming influence ($r_s = .48$, $p < .001$) make certain that people have a clear understanding of the shared vision and allow the laity to express their talents in creative ways and lead by example (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Question 1 involved testing five hypotheses, and two were rejected, but senior ministers who are interested in fostering an organizational climate of greater individual trust, follower satisfaction, personal leader effectiveness, and increased organizational growth should consider further development of self-transcendence and servant-leadership behaviors.

The findings for research question 2 suggested partial support for a relation between leaders' self-assessed self-transcendence and self-assessed servant-leadership behavior. The highest scores for leaders reported from the ASPIRES scale were the subscales of Prayer Fulfillment. The Universality and Connectedness subscales ranked lower. However, none of the positive correlations between ASPIRES and the self-assessed SLBS were strong enough to reject the null hypothesis. Some bias is expected in self-reporting, and ministers consistently ranked themselves higher on the SLBS than the laity viewed them, but the mean scores and standard deviations across the six dimensions were remarkably similar for the ministers. The



Spearman's method ranks data, so the relative lack of variability is not welcome and could have produced lower correlation coefficients.

The data was unable to suggest whether personality was a factor in the self-assessed SLBS scores, perhaps a clergy archetype that warrants study. Still, there were positive correlations between servant-leadership behaviors assessed by the laity and self-reported by leaders on the SLBS across all six dimensions. Spearman's rank-order analysis showed the strongest correlations were for transforming influence ($r_s = .60$, $p < .001$) and authentic self ($r_s = .55$, $p < .001$). This alignment between shepherd and flock matters if servant-leaders hope to inspire others.

CONCLUSION

The specific gap this study sought to address related to how laity viewed their leaders as possessing qualities of self-transcendence and servant-leadership behavior. Science of Mind is a synthesis of science, philosophy, and religious revelation, and there is nothing alien in using a management theory to foster unity. The theory itself, servant-leadership, is a product of human reason endowed by God. The results showed significant and positive correlations between servant-leadership behaviors assessed by the laity and self-reported by leaders. This alignment helps highlight the teaching of Holmes (1966) that the goodness of people and all things lead to the highest good for all. On the secular side, the perception of laity matters if servant-leaders are to develop a high level of trust (Greenleaf, 1977).

While this research is not a causal study, the findings should stimulate additional research concerning the servant-leadership style in other spiritual organizations. No dogma is attached to using servant-leadership, and all denominations are facing a loss of reach. Gaining additional data on the ways in which self-identified servant-leaders and self-transcendence apply in organizations is valuable to



enable organizations to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The elevated SLBS scores self-assessed by ministers could be reporting bias, or it could well be evidence of *agapao* love considered essential for servant-leadership.

Recommendations for future research might include new instruments for self-transcendence (spirituality) and servant-leadership. The uniformity in means and standard deviations that senior ministers displayed on the SLBS suggests a need for finer resolution. A review of the newer surveys may provide opportunities to investigate constructs from a different perspective. A need also exists to explore ways to increase sample size since standard deviations can affect statistics. Second, expanding the current study into one that uses a mixed methodology approach is warranted. Correlations can tell what is happening, but not why. Qualitative methods could help better explain the discrepancy between the SLBS scores self-assessed by senior ministers and those reported by the laity. Data saturation in a qualitative study can, in theory, be attained with a sample of 12 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The qualitative data would enhance the generalizability of any findings and further the practice of servant-leadership.

MY JOURNEY TOWARDS SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

This study and the doctoral experience were but a blink in a journey as I continue to write, teach, live, and parent as a Servant-Leader. I found that this concept/theory/philosophy was a deep passion of mine long before I *really* knew it, and I seek ways daily to reflect on my own journey and to work alongside those that wish to examine their inner leadership lives as well. I said in my book, *Bloom Where You Are Planted* (Davis, 2018, p. xv) that I wanted to share what I was learning, I was excited about it, and the response



from others motivated me to go further. Servant-leadership is a way of life for me. I enjoy helping people and organizations to be the absolute best they can be.

I continue the journey, always reflecting on my life and the work that I do with organizations. It is my calling that I wake each day to meet; as Ferch (2004) invites us to do in the workplace,

And in our workplace, we can work with joy, a sense of calling, and the personal meaning that accompanies good work. These things are possible, for it is in the servant-leader, in the movement toward healing the self, toward truly serving, that an answer to the failures of leadership emerges. On the horizon of this landscape, a landscape that is as personal as it is political and global, we see ourselves free of what binds us, and we walk in such a way that others are drawn forward so that they too may be free. (p. 239)

Mother made her transition on February 1, 2017. Since then, I have been in deep reflection (and grief some days; I miss her terribly) about her life as a Servant-Leader, my 17 years of caretaking for her, and the experience of servant-leadership that caretaking afforded me. Today, I know that this was one of the greatest lessons and experiences I have had (outside of parenting) in forgiveness (of myself and her), and I live my days in extreme gratitude that I followed my assignment from Spirit to care for her. Ferch (2004) said it best, “The servant-leader creates an environment in which forgiveness can be asked and granted, and the servant-leader creates this by example” (p. 236). I hope that Momma is proud of me. I strive to make her proud each day that I breathe. Some days I fail, and some days I get it right.



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