



## SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AT FORTY

### *The Case for Contemporary Research*

—DAN PARRISH AND KATHLEEN ZIMMERMAN-OSTER

Kent Keith (2008) begins his book, *The Case for Servant-leadership*, with the following paragraph:

This book is about creating a better world. There does not have to be so much pain and suffering, so much war and violence, so much starvation and disease, so many crushed dreams and untapped talents, so many problems unsolved and so many opportunities ignored. *The world does not have to be like this.* (p. IX; emphasis in original)

Keith expresses a sentiment that is commonly held among adherents to servant-leadership: the world needs healing, and individuals, group members, and organizational leaders are each responsible for doing what they can to be a part of the solution. It has been forty years since Robert K. Greenleaf ([1970] 2008) penned his first essay and introduced the term *servant-leadership* to the world. Perhaps, the concept is more relevant today than it was even then. In an age characterized by alleged corporate negligence that may have contributed to the catastrophic oil spill on the Gulf Coast, massive home foreclosures, and the struggle to provide a well-trained labor force for U.S. health care needs (Jenkins & Stewart, 2010), scholars and citizens alike are looking for ethical leadership principles that will provide for a safe and just society. Servant-leadership remains a powerful and poignant answer to many of the most vexing organizational dilemmas facing the modern world.

#### QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE

Among the treasures of servant-leadership are the numerous testimonials from those who have experienced and benefited from the concept in action. In practice, servant-leadership is often so powerful for leader and



follower alike that those who have experienced it feel compelled to share their experience. Narrative accounts of servant-leadership come from mainstream authors (Blanchard & Hodges, 2003; De Pree, 1990; Palmer, 1990), from industry (Cheshire, 1987; Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998; McGee-Cooper, Trammell, & Looper, 2007), and from thinkers within the servant-leadership movement (Autry, 2002; Keith, 2008; Spears & Lawrence, 2002). The testimonials often provide powerful accounts of the merits of servant-leadership in organizational contexts, for institutions and individuals alike. Not only are the narrative accounts inspiring, they also capture powerful truths about servant-leadership, albeit typically in an anecdotal style, with few rigorous empirical methods or peer-review processes.

There are many powerful examples of servant-leadership in action, and these stories need to be told. Noted examples of servant-leaders include organizational leaders Herb Kelleher at Southwest Airlines and Jack Lowe at TDIndustries, the writer Margaret Wheatley, and the social activist Harriet Tubman. Their stories are compelling and challenge both leaders and individuals to consider the power behind servant-leadership and to conceive of new applications for servant-leadership in an array of settings.

There have been recent attempts to create a bibliography of servant-leadership resources that provide some powerful tools for those wishing to explore the concept. One of the greatest resources is a bibliography edited by Betsy Hine (2008). Hine, an associate dean of library services at Indiana State University, has compiled a bibliography of selected resources on servant-leadership. The 538-source database includes primarily monographs, books, keynote addresses, dissertations, and a few scholarly articles from peer-reviewed journals (see Figure 1).

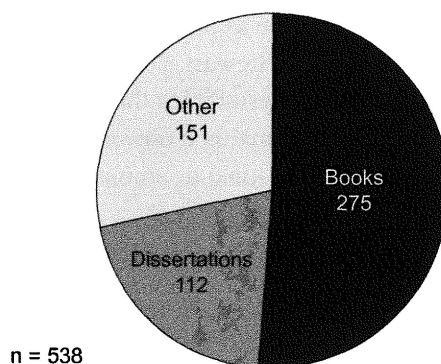


Figure 1: Breakdown of sources (by kind) in the Hine Bibliography (2008)

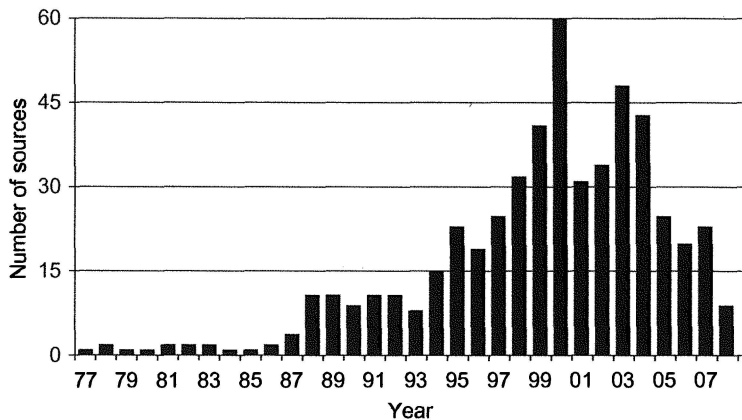


Figure 2: Number of sources in the Hine Bibliography (2008) by year

Notably, the majority of the sources in the Hine Bibliography are books (275 of the total 538 = 51%). However, servant-leadership continues to grow in its stature as more authors from various backgrounds choose to publish works on the concept. An illustration of the publication dates of the resources in the Hine Bibliography provides an interesting visual representation of the growth of the concept of servant-leadership over the past forty years (see Figure 2). With the growing number of publication outlets, it is evident that servant-leadership has gained in popularity and application in recent years.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Like many other leadership theories, rigorous empirical research on servant-leadership is relatively scarce. Though there are numerous theories of leadership, few of them have been supported or validated through quantitative analysis. In his book *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (2007), Peter Northouse works to bridge the gap between popular approaches to leadership and the often more abstract theoretical approaches. Northouse notes that servant-leadership (as with other ethical leadership theories) is an area of research that is in its early stages, with a growing number of research findings to substantiate the theory in practice. While it may be widely held, anecdotally and experientially, that servant-leadership theory is valuable and useful in the world, demonstrating its tenets and power had been a growing and challenging endeavor. Organizational leaders may be reticent to commit to



servant-leadership, especially in trying economic times. Continuing to provide sound research findings to build the empirical base of results can help convince dubious leaders who are considering servant-leadership for their own organizations.

In addition, theories that are supported by bodies of empirical research tend to have greater standing in academic settings. Professors of leadership and organizational theory involved in training future leaders are often more willing to advocate theories that have documented research support in real-world settings. Applied theories supported by publications in peer-reviewed journals provide leverage for professors. By providing a robust body of work illustrating servant-leadership in action, there exists an opportunity to influence not only current, but future, organizational leaders to adopt servant-leadership practices in their institutions.

Research on social constructs such as servant-leadership is difficult. Not only is it difficult to build conceptual models that capture complex human behavior, it is complicated to identify and classify these behaviors in diverse contexts, from healthcare to industry to religious settings. Greenleaf himself admitted the diversity of situations in which servant-leadership can be applied, and recognized that each scenario may, in fact, call for different strategies (Greenleaf, 1977). How can scholars conceptualize something (servant-leadership) that is so diverse? By drawing boundaries around the theory, is there a sacrifice of the concept's power to adapt to situational constraints and needs?

Social scientist Michael Crotty (1998) addresses the difficulties of studying social reality and illustrates the importance of interpretivism, in contrast to positivism, in this unique realm of research. Whereas positivism seeks value-neutral, scientific knowledge that can be obtained by detached observers, interpretivism "looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Drawing on the work of Max Weber, Crotty argues that social science research should be focused on *understanding* rather than *explaining*, which requires different strategies than the strict scientific method common in empirical research. For example, while it might seem ill-advised for a biologist to employ a qualitative case study to explore a new genetic treatment, personal interviews might prove very valuable for a researcher examining leadership principles in action. The complexity of studying human interactions calls for a variety of different research methods and approaches, and both scientific and narrative methods can illustrate valid knowledge of social reality.





Another model that may be appropriate for servant-leadership is “Action Research,” whose classic definition was penned by Rapaport (1970). “Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework” (Rapaport, 1970, p. 499). Susman and Evered (1978) augmented Rapaport’s definition by adding a third goal, “to develop the self-help competencies of people facing problems” (Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 588). Servant-leadership research would seem to fit this paradigm particularly well, as researchers seek not only to identify the concept in practice, but to develop strategies for organizations to put servant-leadership into practice. Action research, like interpretivism, does not meet all of the expectations of positivism, which has caused some to doubt its utility. However, Susman & Evered (1978) addressed this dilemma in much the same way that Crotty nuanced interpretivism. “Action research constitutes a kind of science with a different epistemology that produces a different kind of knowledge, a knowledge which is contingent on the particular situation, and which develops the capacity of members of the organization to solve their own problems” (Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 601). As an example of this methodological approach, Baker (2003) used action research to examine a residential treatment center for women suffering from problems of substance abuse. The study documented the impact of the leader’s service and role modeling to the organization’s members and clients, which resulted in social change.

Thus, an emphasis on empirical research should not be understood as a lessening of the importance of narrative accounts, nor should narrative accounts be understood as a weakening of existing empirical evidence. On the contrary, success stories can motivate scholars to pursue research, and can inspire those who find little personal utility in empirical research. Likewise, some, especially students, may first come into contact with servant-leadership through their reading of empirical research. It might be best to think of the analytical and anecdotal approaches to servant-leadership as two lungs that work together to breathe life into the concept.

Recent years have witnessed growth and momentum for empirical research on servant-leadership. In 2005, *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership* was founded as the first peer-reviewed journal for servant-leadership. It is edited by Shann Ferch and Larry Spears, and is housed at Gonzaga University. In addition, an increasing number of doctoral



students have chosen to examine servant-leadership in their dissertations. Of the 112 dissertations listed in the servant-leadership bibliography assembled by Betsy Hine (2008), 85 (76%) have been written since 2000.

#### REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

The existing empirical literature on Servant-Leadership falls primarily into three categories: Theory and Conceptual Development, Scale Development, and Application. A few researchers (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Russell & Stone, 2002) have attempted to set the stage for the growth of servant-leadership by offering a model which assimilates five key variables (vision, influence, credibility, trust, and service). Their articulation of the model and the constructs are implied in the literature, but empirical support is lacking. However, this key step of attempting to obtain a unified definition and explication of the concept has led to additional research on how to measure the variables in the model and the overall model itself.

#### DEVELOPING A SERVANT-LEADERSHIP SCALE

One of the challenges facing scholarly researchers is the creation of operational definitions of servant-leadership and its proposed outcomes and the development of reliable measurement tools. The matter of choosing a measurement scale presents difficulties in terms of validating the instrument and the selection of the constructs to be evaluated. Once a scale is devised, it must be validated through iterations in various research settings, to prove that the scale is measuring concepts and factors that are not correlated to or confounded by other constructs. Especially for a research literature that is as relatively young as servant-leadership, these issues are serious and can make progress difficult. Nevertheless, researchers have been making progress in developing measurement scales for servant-leadership.

Researchers such as Laub (2005); Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson (2008); and van Dierendonck (2006) have worked to develop servant-leadership theory and to develop measures that examine the impact of servant-leadership in action. McClellan (2008, 2009, 2011) summarizes the various scales scholars have developed to measure the construct. He notes,



The reality is a number of studies have been conducted both to clarify the construct and develop measures, as well as to verify the impact of servant-leadership on outcomes. At the same time, the research is still limited in that most of the studies have been exploratory in nature and most of the instruments have proved inconsistent in factor analysis across multiple studies.

As current and future researchers use these and other scales to measure servant-leadership in various settings, those with the most explanatory power and research validity will eventually become standardized and accepted. As servant-leadership theory matures, researchers will be able to build momentum for the concept and its application.

#### APPLICATION AND OUTCOMES

The scholarly literature on the impact of servant-leadership is relatively small in scope, with a large number of unpublished dissertations that address what impact servant-leadership can have on individuals, communities, and organizations. From the body of empirical literature published in journals, emphases are on research in health care (Jenkins & Stewart, 2010), organizational work settings (Ehrhart, 2004; Horsman, 2008; Keena, 2009; Koshal & Patterson, 2008; Mayer, Bardes, & Piccolo, 2008; Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Oke, 2010; West, Bocârnea, & Marañon, 2009), and higher education settings (Hammermeister, et al., 2008; Mayer, et al., 2008; Neill, Hayward, & Peterson, 2007; Pekerti & Sendjaya, 2010; Westre, 2008). The findings of these studies suggest that the practice of servant-leadership in various environments leads to desirable outcomes and is a useful strategy for motivating others to work toward a common goal or create employee satisfaction. However, since so few of these studies provide universal outcomes that can be generalized, additional research is needed to leverage the benefits of this burgeoning leadership theory.

#### THE GREENLEAF SCHOLARS PROGRAM

One of the chief proponents of servant-leadership is the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership (<http://www.greenleaf.org/>). The Greenleaf Center was founded by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1964 as the Center for Applied Ethics, and Greenleaf served as its president until 1984. The



Greenleaf Center is dedicated to promoting the “awareness, understanding, and practice of servant leadership by individuals and organizations” (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2010b), and it supports numerous conferences, programs, and publications to that end.

Recognizing the opportunity to bolster servant-leadership by supporting rigorous empirical research, in 2008 the Greenleaf Center’s Board of Trustees initiated a fellowship program: the Greenleaf Scholars Program (GSP). The GSP provides fellowships for doctoral candidates and early-career scholars to research the impact of servant-leadership across society (<http://www.greenleaf.org/scholars/>).

The goals of the GSP are:

- (1) To inspire a new generation of critical scholarship based on the concepts of servant-leadership that were articulated in the writings of Robert K. Greenleaf; (2) to support rigorous empirical studies that offer evidence of the impact of servant-leadership on the health and effectiveness of organizations and communities; and (3) to build a nurturing community of academic researchers, practitioners, and students who study and teach servant-leadership. (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2010a)

The GSP is focused on early-career scholars (either in the dissertation phase or who have received their doctorates in the past five years) in the hopes of inspiring them to commit to research agendas that include servant-leadership. To promote a variety of approaches to servant-leadership research, the GSP considers applications from scholars who use various methods, provided these approaches are recognized as rigorous by peers in the academy as executed by a GSP International Review Panel (IRP). The GSP provides \$2,500 fellowships to support research on servant-leadership, and provides mentoring and support from the seven members of the IRP, which is comprised of leading scholars from across the United States and around the world.

In its inaugural year, 2009, three Greenleaf Scholars were named, followed by four more Greenleaf Scholars chosen in 2010. Greenleaf Scholars are expected to pursue publication of their research in top peer-reviewed journals; the IRP and the Greenleaf Center provide mentoring for Scholars in the research and publication of their findings. The application process begins in January of each year, with applications due mid-March. Further information about the Greenleaf Scholars Program can be found on the Greenleaf Center Web site (<http://www.greenleaf.org/scholars/>).



## CONCLUSIONS

Servant-leadership is a powerful concept that addresses many of the difficulties and dilemmas facing leaders and organizations in the modern era. There are numerous ways to promote the concept of servant-leadership, from personal testimonies to scholarly articles. Increasing numbers of doctoral students are choosing to examine servant-leadership in their dissertations, and initiatives such as the Greenleaf Scholars Program are working to support rigorous empirical research by early-career scholars. These and other similar efforts may lead to an increased recognition and application of servant-leadership in organizations and classrooms. For the concept to continue its steady growth and to flourish into a global and international construct with direct application and impact throughout the world, it will take a coordinated effort from practitioners and scholars alike.

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