

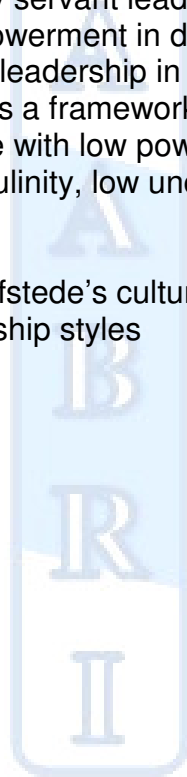
# **THE CROSS-CULTURAL LEADER: THE APPLICATION OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP THEORY IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Leadership theories have evolved from a focus on traits, to behaviors, to contingency theories, to more contemporary approaches including servant leadership theory. This paper provides an overview of the principles of servant leadership and identifies characteristics displayed by servant leaders in the workplace, with special emphasis on the importance of empowerment in defining a servant-leader. It also addresses the application of servant leadership in a cross-cultural context utilizing Hofstede's five cultural dimensions as a framework. This paper concludes that servant leadership is best applied in a culture with low power distance, low to moderate individualism, low to moderate masculinity, low uncertainty avoidance and a moderate to high long-term orientation.

Key Words: Servant Leadership, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, cross-cultural management, empowerment, leadership styles



## Introduction

Leadership has been and continues to be a topic of considerable interest in the management literature. While there is no universal definition of leadership, there is agreement on the fact that leadership involves an influencing process between leaders and followers to ensure achievement of organizational goals. Early studies in the area of leadership focused mainly on trait theories in the hopes of identifying the personality characteristics of the ideal leader. When they proved unsuccessful, research moved on to the examination of behaviors that would differentiate leaders from followers. But again, researchers were unable to define a universal theory of leadership. Contingency theories, which essentially said that the most effective leadership style depended on the situation, the followers, and the leaders, replaced the search for the “one best” leadership style. More recent research has focused on charismatic and transformational theories of leadership. This paper discusses the application of another contemporary theory of leadership, servant leadership theory, and examines its application in the cross-cultural context.

## An Overview of Servant Leadership

Before discussing the cross-cultural applications of servant leadership an overview of the basic philosophy and tenets behind the servant leadership model is necessary. In 1977 Robert Greenleaf introduced the concept of servant leadership. According to Greenleaf (1977) servant-leaders are driven to serve first, rather than to lead first, always striving to meet the highest priority needs of others. Greenleaf identified the principal motive of the traditional leader as being the desire to lead followers to achieve organizational objectives. On the other hand, the driving motivation of a servant-leader is to serve others to be all that they are capable of becoming. De Pree (1989) defines the nature of servant leadership as serving not leading. By serving others, leaders lead other people to the point of self-actualization.

While most traditional leadership theories are behaviorally based, servant leadership emerges from a leader's principles, values, and beliefs (Walker, 2003, p. 25). Before publishing his seminal work on servant leadership, Greenleaf spent 40 years in the business world as an executive at AT&T (Spears, 1996). Therefore his leadership model combined theoretical as well as practical principles regarding the most effective methods of influencing and developing followers. However, Greenleaf was certainly not the first to introduce the concept of servant leadership. Its origins are clearly traced back to the bible and stories of Jesus Christ. Service to followers is demonstrated in many of the acts Christ performed, most famously by his washing the feet of his disciples.

In defining his servant leadership theory, Spears explains that Greenleaf was also influenced by a short novel, *Journey to the East*, written by Herman Hesse.

“...Hesse's book is the story of a mythical journey by a group of people on a spiritual quest. The central figure of the story is Leo, who accompanies the party as their servant, and who sustains them with his caring spirit. All goes well with the journey until one day Leo disappears. The group quickly falls apart, and the journey is abandoned. They discover that they cannot make it without the

servant, Leo. After many years of searching, the narrator of the story stumbles on Leo and is taken into the religious order that had sponsored the original journey. There, he discovers that Leo, whom he had first known as a servant, was in fact the head of the order, its guiding spirit, and a great and noble leader” (Spears, 1996, p. 33).

Spears reports that Greenleaf concluded that the great leader is first experienced as a servant to others, and he believed that true leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others.

Greenleaf (1977) asserted that servant-leaders put the needs and interests of others above their own. They make a deliberate choice to serve others. However, this should not be associated with a low self-concept or low self-esteem. A strong self-image, moral conviction, and emotional stability are factors that drive leaders to make this choice (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). The servant-leader seeks to make sure that other people’s highest-priority needs are being served. Servant-leaders seek to transform their followers to “...grow healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants” (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 13-14).

### **Characteristics of Servant-Leaders**

After reviewing the literature, Russell and Stone (2002, p. 146) described 20 characteristics that researchers in this field have consistently identified as being associated with servant-leaders. The first list comprises what they termed functional attributes due to their repetitive prominence in the literature. These functional attributes are the characteristics and distinctive features belonging to servant-leaders and can be observed through specific leader behaviors in the workplace:

1. Vision
2. Honesty
3. Integrity
4. Trust
5. Service
6. Modeling
7. Pioneering
8. Appreciation of others
9. Empowerment

The remaining characteristics are identified as accompanying attributes of servant leadership:

1. Communication
2. Credibility
3. Competence
4. Stewardship
5. Visibility
6. Influence
7. Listening
8. Encouragement
9. Teaching
10. Delegation

Russell and Stone assert that these accompanying attributes are not secondary in importance; instead they are complementary and may even be prerequisites to effective servant leadership. Pollard concludes (1997, pp. 49-50) that a real leader is not the “...person with the most distinguished title, the highest pay, or the longest tenure...but the role model, the risk taker, the servant; not the person who promotes himself or herself, but the promoter of others”.

## Empowerment

One characteristic that continues to receive considerable attention in the leadership literature in general and in servant leadership in particular, is empowerment. Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly and Konopaske (2006, p. 500) define empowerment as granting individuals the permission to utilize their talents, skills and resources, and experience to make decisions to complete their workloads in a timely manner. In many cases this means employees are making decisions about their work that were previously the domain of management. Managers must relinquish the traditional means of power and delegate some decision-making responsibilities to employees (Pollard, 1996). This involves entrusting workers with authority and responsibility (Costigan, Ilteer, & Berman, 1998). Empowerment is a key concept in servant leadership (see Russell & Stone, 2002, p. 152 for an extensive list of authors supporting this premise). Bass (2000) stresses that servant leadership encourages follower learning, growth, and autonomy, which are all nurtured through empowerment.

Servant-leaders respect the capabilities of their followers and enable them to exercise their abilities, share power, and do their best (Oster, 1991; Russell, 2001; Winston, 1999). The servant-leader is prepared to share power through empowerment, thereby involving followers in planning and decision making (Bass, 1990). Manz (1998, p. 99) stated that, "Wise leaders lead others to lead themselves", which ultimately leads to a decentralized organizational structure that focuses on information and power sharing. Many managers struggle with the processes of empowerment and delegation (Argyris, 1998; Sanders, 1994), but these are essential behaviors of the servant-leader. Covey (2006, p. 5) quotes Greenleaf as saying: "The only authority deserving our allegiance is that which is freely granted by the led to the leader in proportion to the servant stature of the leader". Thus the leader gains power by exercising his or her servant qualities such as empowerment and service, rather than the traditional view that power sharing will diminish his or her ability to influence followers.

## Transformational versus Servant Leadership

Parallels have been drawn between transformational leadership and servant leadership. Stone, Russell and Patterson (2004, p. 354) identify numerous analogous characteristics between the two theories including: influence; vision; trust; respect/credibility; risk-sharing/delegation; integrity; and modeling. They posit that this is because both transformational and servant leadership are attempts to define and explain people-oriented leadership styles. However, they identify one essential element that differentiates the two theories. Stone et al. state that, "While transformational leaders and servant-leaders both show concern for their followers, the overriding focus of the servant-leader is upon service to followers. The transformational leader has a greater concern for getting followers to engage in and support organizational objectives" (p. 354). Thus the focus of the transformational leader is directed toward the organization and building commitment to organizational objectives through empowering followers, while the servant-leader focuses on the service itself.

That is not to say that the servant-leader ignores performance standards. Ferch (2004, p. 235) quotes Greenleaf as stating, "The servant as leader always empathizes,

always accepts the person, but sometimes refuses to accept some of the person's effort or performance as good enough". Greenleaf makes this important distinction between accepting the person and not accepting the effort or performance, thus indicating that quality performance is still important, and when the servant-leader builds an environment of trust, he or she is better able to bring about change to enhance effort or boost performance (Kolp & Rea, 2006). Organizations are only sustainable when they serve human needs (Covey, 2006). Servant-leaders are people-oriented and focused on the needs of those around them. They value human equality and seek to enhance the personal development and professional contributions of all organizational members (Russell, 2001). Ultimately, this formula should be effective in most types of organizations.

### **Cross-Cultural Application of Servant Leadership**

As our national economy becomes more closely tied to the international economy, it is impossible to discuss management theory without some acknowledgement of the impact of cross-cultural contingencies. A management practice that works quite effectively in the United States might have disastrous results in a plant in Singapore and vice versa. Similarly, the increasingly diverse nature of our workforce within our own borders compels us to examine the challenges we face from multiculturalism in the workforce. In 1981 Ouchi developed Theory Z which blended Japanese and American management practices into a new management model that he proposed would be effective in both cultures (research support has been mixed). It is interesting to consider whether the servant leadership model is a universal one that is a good fit cross-culturally, or whether it is a model that fits the cultural norms of some societies more effectively than others. It is not at all apparent that this model is consistent with the norms and expectations of either American managers or their workers. Hofstede (1993) identified five cultural dimensions that provide a framework for identifying similarities and differences across cultures. Each of these characteristics will be applied to determine the best cultural fit with servant leadership theory.

### **Power Distance**

The first dimension identified by Hofstede is labeled Power Distance. He defines this as "...the degree of inequality among people which the population of a country considers as normal: from relatively equal (that is, small power distance) to extremely unequal (large power distance)" (Hofstede, 1993, p. 89). In order to be effective, the servant-leader requires significant participation and interaction with employees. Employees must feel free to contribute their thoughts, opinions and recommendations, while leaders must respect these contributions and utilize them as a basis for building a more effective workplace. If the employee views the leader as omnipotent and unquestioningly correct in all things, it is unlikely that he or she will provide an opinion let alone challenge a leader's position. In a society where each member is viewed as having an important role regardless of his or her social or economic position, or his or her position in the societal or organizational hierarchy, it is expected that there will be a

free flow of ideas and discussion, thereby empowering employees to take some control and responsibility in the workplace.

Empowering employees means employees are assuming roles that were previously the domain of management such as the assignment of tasks, ordering materials, and even disciplining co-workers. Leaders from low power distance countries are much more likely to acknowledge the capabilities of their employees to assume these tasks and complete them successfully. Empowered employees share in both planning and decision making which will ultimately lead to more decentralized organizations that embrace power sharing.

Because part of becoming a servant-leader involves personal growth through feedback on strengths and weaknesses, it is essential that employees feel comfortable with providing this feedback to their leaders. It is also essential that leaders recognize that this feedback comes from a valid source. In order to continue to grow as leaders and to ensure that employees continue to grow and develop their abilities, the introduction of 360 degree feedback is a useful data collection process. The application of this mechanism to collect feedback and evaluate both leaders and followers has a greater likelihood of success in a low power distance country. Both parties will feel more comfortable providing and receiving feedback and acknowledging its legitimacy and accuracy. The feedback is therefore much more likely to be acted upon to improve the attitudes and behaviors of leaders and employees and therefore play a role in building a more effective organization. In a high power distance country it is unlikely that employees would provide accurate feedback to their managers and it is similarly unlikely that managers would consider it a meaningful and useful source of data for performance improvement.

## **Individualism**

Individualism is the second dimension identified by Hofstede and he defines it as "...the degree to which people in a country prefer to act as individuals rather than as members of groups" (Hofstede, 1993, p. 89). The servant leadership model requires that the leader and the employees work together much more closely as a team. Employees and leaders jointly address issues in the workplace and collectively determine an outcome that is in the best interest of the employees and the organization. The servant-leader identifies the success of the employee as a joint effort between the employee and the leader. The employee does not succeed in spite of the leader but rather he or she succeeds with the leader. Success requires cooperation between leaders and followers, and it requires cooperation among the leaders themselves. Factions and in-fighting do not promote achievement of organizational or employee goals. Servant-leaders empower employees to take on many of those roles traditionally performed by managers. Without some feeling of responsibility and loyalty to the group the employee is unlikely to commit fully to these tasks.

Similarly, the peer feedback portion of the 360 degree feedback system will be more effective in a group of employees who feel some responsibility for the performance of one another. More constructive feedback will be provided when the employee recognizes the importance of each individual's contribution to the success of the team. Organizations are increasingly applying the team concept in the design of

work. Leaders today must be effective at managing and leading not just individuals but teams as well. A servant-leader is an excellent fit with the self-managing teams employed in many of today's organizations. These teams are empowered to manage themselves and the leader's role is to assist the team by removing any roadblocks that interfere with its path to success. In other words, the leader is there to develop the employees into leaders and employee development is a key characteristic of the servant-leader. A low to moderately individualistic culture appears to be the best fit for the servant-leader.

## **Masculinity**

In this third dimension Hofstede (1993) differentiates between characteristics that are considered to be traditionally masculine versus those that are considered to be traditionally feminine. He identifies tough values like assertiveness, performance, success and competition with the male role, while he identifies more tender values like quality of life, maintaining warm personal relationships, service, care for the weak, and solidarity with the female role (Hofstede, 1993, p. 90). The servant-leader role seems to be a better fit with those traditionally female characteristics; in fact service is identified as a largely female value. The effectiveness of the servant-leader depends on his or her ability to develop a personal connection with the employees. It requires that leaders understand the needs and desires of their employees so that they can individualize their jobs, rewards, and training to fit the needs, experiences and desires of those employees. It requires building trust and loyalty so that the leader can empower those employees to take the lead in the workplace. However, this nurturing relationship does not mean that quality performance is ignored. Greenleaf (1977) was clear that a servant-leader could accept the person and not accept the effort or performance. This reinforces that quality performance is still important, and when the servant-leader builds an environment of trust, he or she is better able to bring about change to enhance effort or boost performance (Kolp & Rea, 2006). Thus the application of feminine qualities is a way to secure the valued masculine outcomes. It would appear that a culture rating low to moderate on the masculinity characteristic would provide an environment most conducive to the success of the servant-leader.

## **Uncertainty Avoidance**

Hofstede (1993) identified the fourth dimension of his cultural construct as Uncertainty Avoidance which he "...defined as the degree to which people in a country prefer structured over unstructured situations" (Hofstede, 1993, p. 90). The servant-leader focuses his or her energy on employee development and the hallmark of the servant-leader is a focus on employee empowerment. Rather than a traditional workplace where the leader sets the rules, the quotas, assigns the work and evaluates the performance of the employee, a workplace guided by a servant-leader will push these responsibilities down to the employees themselves. The employees must be prepared to stand up and accept these new responsibilities. For many this will be new territory and there will likely be some reluctance as they are uncertain about how to perform these new roles. But as employees gain experience and confidence, the

servant-leader fulfills his or her goal to develop new leaders for the organization. The leader will provide training and guidance to employees as they take on these new responsibilities, and ultimately the employees will experience personal and professional growth and success. A society that shuns new experiences, that resists change and new organizational structures will fail to embrace these new opportunities. Employees who do not develop leadership skills will therefore be trapped in their current roles with no hope of self actualization.

The servant-leader must relinquish some control in the workplace in order to meet the development needs of the employees. The workplace led by a servant-leader will require more engagement and commitment on the part of the employee as the content and context of the workplace will be, at least initially, neither predictable nor conventional. Leaders and employees who have a higher tolerance for uncertainty will be more effective under this model.

### **Long-term versus Short-term Orientation**

The previous four dimensions are those identified by Hofstede in his original research into this area in the early 1980s (Hofstede, 1983). This final dimension was identified in his later research (Hofstede, 1993). Hofstede explains this dimension as, “On the long-term side one finds values oriented towards the future, like thrift (saving) and persistence. On the short-term side one finds values rather oriented towards the past and present, like respect for tradition and fulfilling social obligations” (1993, p. 90). One defining characteristic of the servant-leader is his or her desire to develop the employee in such a way as to maximize his or her long-term potential. The servant-leader seeks to develop each employee by meeting his or her needs in both the short-term and the long-term. This means that the servant-leader utilizes immediate rewards (like cash compensation) but also takes a longer-term view of building a more committed and engaged employee and ultimately an organizational leader. The servant-leader will utilize training, career development, challenging job assignments, and educational opportunities to build skills that the employee will need in the long term. While the servant-leader seeks the satisfaction of the employee’s short-term needs, there is also a longer term goal in which the servant-leader tries to develop the employee and build his or her skills for success in the future – both personally and professionally. The employee must also see that longer term benefits can be gleaned from the leader. The outcome of this approach will be the acquisition of more skills and higher level competencies that will prepare the employee for future opportunities. The goal of the servant-leader is to build more leaders – specifically servant-leaders. Ultimately success will be measured in terms of accomplishments achieved today and tomorrow. The servant leadership theory seems to fit best in a culture with a moderate to high long-term orientation.

### **Where does Servant Leadership fit best?**

Hofstede (1993) evaluated ten countries in terms of their manifestation of each of these dimensions within their cultures. Utilizing his table (p. 91) it is possible to estimate which of these countries might be a best fit for the servant-leader. The



countries examined were the United States, Germany, Japan, France, the Netherlands, Hong Kong (pre reversion to communist rule), Indonesia, West Africa, Russia, and China. In the application of servant leadership, two dimensions, Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance, stand out as being more critical to its success than the others. The United States is the only country of these ten that ranks low on both Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance. Germany and the Netherlands ranked low on Power Distance and medium on Uncertainty Avoidance. Interestingly, these three countries all rank high on Individualism, which runs counter to the ideal in the model. While the United States and Germany also ranked high on Masculinity (where the model predicts low to moderate would be preferred), the Netherlands did rank low on this factor. The United States was also scored low on Long-term Orientation, while both Germany and the Netherlands ranked in the moderate category on this variable, which was preferred by the model.

While none of these countries represents the ideal cultural environment for the application of servant leadership theory it appears when compared against this sample of countries, the Netherlands provides the best environment fit.

## **Conclusion**

Organizational leadership has evolved from an emphasis on task orientation, obedience to orders, and top-down management control to the acknowledgement today of the need to build a more relationship-oriented workplace that empowers employees, focuses on their development, and fosters teamwork. Increasingly we communicate via voice mail, email, and text messaging which serves to isolate employees and builds an increasingly solitary work environment. But the relationship that the leader builds with the employee can also play a significant role in developing the employee's skills, abilities and competencies and ultimately improving organizational outcomes through increased loyalty, commitment and engagement. Servant leadership theory is one approach designed to encourage a more relationship-oriented workplace. After applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions to this theory, it appears that certain cultural characteristics will facilitate its application. While servant-leadership theory was developed in the United States based on American research, it does not appear that it is a model that is only applicable to the American leader or even one that is necessarily best suited to the American workplace. Understanding these cultural dimensions and how they impact servant leadership theory make the leader aware of the type of workplace that must be developed to best facilitate its application. While this may require some characteristics that run counter to the prevailing cultural norms, it will likely generate a new dimension of engagement and commitment on the part of both the manager and the employee.

## **Future Research**

Given the theoretical nature of this paper the next step would be to test the relationship between servant leadership and cultural characteristics empirically. While there is currently no preferred measurement tool to assess the level of servant leadership within an organization, several proxy measures could be utilized to

determine whether aspects of servant leadership are apparent in the workplace. Organizations could be assessed on their commitment to employee empowerment, their level of support (both in terms of time and money) to employee training and development, the level of communication from senior leaders and direct supervisors, employee recognition (both monetary and non-monetary) and the degree of encouragement employees perceive from their managers for their personal and professional development. The performance evaluation tool could also be assessed to determine if it is simply a criticism of current performance, or whether it provides an avenue for discussion between the employee and the supervisor in such areas as future goals and employee achievement. Companies rating highly in these areas would be considered favorable to servant leadership techniques. Hofstede's tool could then be administered to organizations to determine how they rate on each of the five cultural dimensions. It could then be determined if correlations exist between servant leadership and cultural characteristics.

However, assessing this relationship within one country is clearly a limiting factor. Corporate culture, while unique to each organization, is influenced by the broader culture in which the organization exists. Therefore, corporate cultures within the same country will likely share some fundamental similarities. The best measure of this relationship would be to administer the servant leadership assessment and Hofstede's assessment in several countries. The results would indicate whether correlations exist between different cultural characteristics and the likelihood of the successful adoption of servant leadership within the workplace.



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