
The Existence of Servant Leadership: Evidence from Modern Church Organisations

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Abstract: Servant Leadership is a theory that lacks practice in most organisations. Evidence from modern church organisations suggests that Servant Leadership is difficult to practice, even though Greenleaf suggested that leaders should be servants first before becoming leaders [11]. This research aimed to investigate the existence of Servant Leadership in practice. The study randomly collected data from 20 churches through YouTube and transcribed the videos before analysed the transcripts. The data represented modern churches across the World that preach and post their material on YouTube, and the representation of participants were two females and 18 males church leaders; this was because men widely occupy the profession. After data analysis, the outcome pointed out that church leaders say "me" word more often than either "Jesus" or followers (you). Also, the results say followers say "papa" (the leader) more frequent than "Jesus". These findings fit into a mediating model with independent (Jesus) and dependent (church followers), and church leaders being mediators. However, the focus on the model is solid towards church leaders than Jesus, yet Jesus remains unchanged. The modern churches' leaders have become a self, and the position taken by their followers drive this. Despite the limitations that include choosing a sample online could have been biased, this investigation concludes that servant leadership is less evidence on practice despite the long history of the theory in the church. The researcher suggests more enquiry is needed in other sectors, to establish these findings.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Greenleaf Theory, Church Organisations

1. Introduction

For decades now, the debate on servant leadership is continuing; the concept of servant leadership was linked to religious organisation from inception. The characteristics and measurements of servant leadership are well documented in expanding literature, which shows a positive impact on followers as individuals and groups. Servant leadership is a concept that includes all aspects of ethical, relational and positive outcome dimensions [7].

Servant Leadership is a philosophy still to be seen in practice in the 21st century since Greenleaf coined the concept in 1970 [11]. Suggesting his idea, Greenleaf thought of humble servant leader who depends on followers for strength and knowledge [11]. The leader that emphasises on empowerment of followers; the one who says I lead because I am a *servant* rather than I lead because I am a *leader* [24]. Therefore when Greenleaf introduced the concept, religious people matched the philosophy with the work of Jesus, who

served as an exemplary servant leader [5]. Also, many charity organisations adopted the servant leadership style because it focuses on service and human development and expansion of the organisation [5]. However, this servant leadership attitude has been seen as challenging, to develop the skills by modern organisations, in particular, churches. Servant leadership is a set of attitudes that need to be developed by church leaders who choose to adopt it. There is a unique mindset that should exist for a leader to act as a servant leader and be successful at attracting crowds of followers who depend on him/her. Even though many researchers found that variety leadership skills are learnable and adaptable, servant leadership skills are still to be seen in among the modern church leaders [8, 14, 16].

The today's churches' leaders who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ the son of God, Jesus himself who in his days served the followers, fall short, despite reading the Bible [30]. In line with Greenleaf's argument, Jesus' service resembled servant leadership [11]. It is written that Jesus was a servant (e.g., Philippians 2:7; Isaiah 11:5, 42:1 and 53:11; Zechariah

3:8; John 4:34, and 9:4) [30]. Philippians 2:7 says "*Jesus took upon him the form of a servant*", a humble servant of God, yet he was the son of God with the same nature of God, in other words, he was God himself, but voluntarily became the Servant of his father [30]. Hence, Isaiah 42:1 suggests that Jesus was a Servant elect of God [30].

Furthermore, before Jesus came to the World, Jesus was prophesied as the oncoming Servant of the Lord (Zechariah 3:8, and Isaiah 42:1) [30]. The prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus was sent from the high heavens to serve as a servant under the law in Egypt, where the Israelites were under slavery, yet, he declared that he was about his father's business (claiming to a servant of his father) [30]. In these words, Jesus was saying he was there to serve as his father directed him for the people [30]. God who sent him proclaimed him as a "Righteous *Servant*" (Isaiah 11:5, and 53:11) [30]. Consequently, Jesus during his time was serving others first rather than serving himself [10]. Hence, Chung held to the premise that if today's church leaders keep the Jesus' principles of servant leadership the church will grow and souls saved [6].

Indeed, the leadership in churches should differ from that in the World because of the religious connotation [6]. Besides, Jesus, there are other characters who also upheld the servant leadership concept throughout the Bible, for example, Abraham, Moses, David and Daniel, who also described themselves as servants in the Old Testament, and Paul, Peter, and James servants of God in the New Testament (James 1:1, 2 Peter 1:1 and Titus 1:1) [30]. However, in contrast, today there were disturbing reports about the church organisations, involving leaders against followers in modern churches. There is a case in the UK of a church leader that was convicted of sexual indecency involving followers, including a close relative [13]. Also, recently, another church leader in Zimbabwe was accused of again, sexually inappropriate conduct by a follower, a story that was circulated in local newspapers [31]. In South Africa, a church leader exposed followers to a dangerous chemical by spraying them with insecticide, Doom [3]. In other parts of the World, a South Korean church leader appeared in the news beating followers and ordering them also to beat each other [29]. Even, Alok et al. found that modern churches are suffering from leadership problems and false prophecies and fake biblical teachings among other issues and these harmful practices have implications for growth [2].

Then, considering all these current issues in the modern church leadership and complaints from the followers, there is a need for research to verify these complaints from the leadership perspective. This article aims to investigate the servant leadership style portrayed in modern churches. Therefore the study objectives are;

1. To investigate whether there is a servant leadership style in modern churches.
2. To understand the servant leadership practices in these organisation.
3. To evaluate the benefits of servant leadership in today's churches.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Background of Servant Leadership

Greenleaf first suggested the philosophy of servant leadership referring to a servant of people [11]. In his theory, Greenleaf argued that servant leadership has a 'dual being' meaning that there should be a *servant* and *leader* [11]. Greenleaf wrote about the development of servant leadership [11]. He argued that one should be a *servant-first* before becoming a *leader* because he believed that the motivation is to serve others than self [10]. In other words, the argument against people who want to be *leaders-first* before becoming *servants* as ineffective, hence he claimed. Therefore, these are two distinct leaders that also have a different impact on followers [11]. Greenleaf saw this arrangement as effective leadership and is possible and imperative in both followers and organisational performance [11]. Many studies found a positive connection between servant leadership and followers' performance, for example, [18] and [33]. The servant leadership style increases team effort by increasing confidence among members [12]. The benefits of servant leadership include the focus is on followers' well-being, the growth of communities, more autonomous and develop as future leaders themselves [10]. Greenleaf's theory of servant leadership was upheld by other writers, for example, [5] and [20] as efficient. The importance of the theory was to take servant-ship to fellow followers with the aim to fulfil the needs of others [22, 27]. In other words, the leader that brings a meaningful contribution to followers.

2.2. Traits of Servant Leadership

Greenleaf first suggested the critical trait of Servant leadership as "*servant*" [11]. However, from the summary of Greenleaf's theory, traits such as a *helper*, *mentor*, *coach*, *motivator*, and *people-oriented* can be observed [11]. More recently, Roberts listed the traits of servant leadership as *love*, *humanity*, *forgiveness*, *hope*, *transparency*, *empathy*, *perseverance* and *compassion* [21]. Northouse argued that leadership traits are unique characteristics that make someone inspire in a leadership position as a great leader [19]. These traits can be seen on ethical behaviours that have a transformational impact on others [11]. Spears suggested that servant leadership traits can be understood by six core values, which are *trustworthiness*, *caring*, *respect*, *citizenship* and taking *responsibility* [26]. Hence, Warren Bennis pointed on *vision*, *trustworthiness*, *inspiration* and *empathy* as characteristics of a caring leader [4].

The interpretation of Greenleaf's theory suggests that it comes naturally that one wants to *serve* and later chooses to become a *leader* [11]. Therefore by bringing together the words servant and leader, Greenleaf created a paradoxical concept of *servant leadership* [11], and that has ten descriptions [26];

Listening: The theory suggests that a servant leader should be one who listens attentively to followers and take their wishes on board in any decision in the organisation.

Therefore, an excellent *listener* becomes a trait in servant leadership [26].

Empathy: Again *empathy* is a critical trait in servant leadership. A servant leader empathises with followers, accepts and recognises their differences and builds them to be partners, but not rejecting their uniqueness [26].

Healing: Being a *healer* of relationships with followers and self is another essential trait [26]. Spears suggested that a servant leader should be one who mends broken spirits and emotions [26]. Greenleaf mentioned that servant leaders must help those who seek wholeness [11].

Awareness: Spears stated that servant leaders should have general and self-awareness that enables them to understand issues around power, ethics and values from a holistic perspective [26]. Greenleaf argued that "*awareness is not a giver of solace-it is a disturber and awakener*" [11]. Hence, in other words, servant leadership is about being alert.

Persuasion: Servant Leadership is about depending on persuasion in decision making, therefore not forcing their way through any conclusion [26]. So, servant leaders rely on consensus using persuasion, rather than coercion that points to an authoritative way of leadership [26].

Conceptualisation: Servant Leaders have the discipline to think beyond followers' current realities; they are great dreamers for the people, all to improve their lives [26]. Therefore the ability to conceptualise for others is a vital trait in servant leadership.

Foresight: Servant leadership include the ability to foresee the future times on behalf of the followers so that if danger is coming their way, the foresight leader will prepare to defend his/her people [26]. Therefore foreseeing becomes a crucial trait in servant leadership.

Stewardship: Greenleaf believed that servant leaders run their organisations in trust for the good of society [11]. This Corporate Social Responsibility focus defines the intention of the servant leader to meet the needs of others with openness and persuasion rather than control [26].

Commitment: Again, the CSR centre of attention enhances the development of the entire community. This approach includes funding developments in the society, inclusive decision-making processes and encouraging followers to get involved for personal and professional growth [26].

Building Community: Greenleaf mentioned that servant leadership should build local communities to improve human lives [26]. So the commitment to building a community is also a vital trait that can be seen in servant leadership.

2.3. The Way Servant leadership Works

The theory of servant leadership looks at the behaviours of the leaders, on how they treat their followers. As Greenleaf suggested that servant leaders commit themselves to put followers first in any decision, this means being honest and fair with others [11]. In other words, the servant leadership creates a long-lasting relationship with followers to be able to understand abilities, needs and personal goals, so that they can be cultivated to achieve full potential [10]. Hence, Liden et al. observed that once an organisation changes its

leadership focus to servant leadership, the serving culture is created [15]. However, servant leadership works when leaders have a motivation to serve followers and deep-seated interest to see others prosper [19]. On the other side, the followers should also openly receive the servant leadership that want to better their lives [19]. From, Greenleaf's philosophical position, servant leaders should share their power and allow others to grow and become independent [11]. Therefore, there is no competition between servant leadership and followers.

Even though, the critics say there is no common theoretical framework for servant leadership to date [32]; in other words, the robustness of the theoretical formulations remains limited. However, the benefits of servant leadership are admirable [10]. Northouse claimed that servant leadership applies to any organisation [19]. Within the framework of serving others first, the prescribed servant leadership behaviours are not complicated, therefore understood in a variety of leadership situations, including in modern churches [11, 19]. However, the current study observes Van Dierendonck's argument that servant leadership concept lacks common definition among researchers and Northouse also argues that paradoxical philosophical nature of Greenleaf's idea could have practical implementation difficulties [19, 32]. Therefore, this current researcher argues whether servant leadership exist in today's churches hierarchies. The research question is; does the servant leadership exist in modern churches?

3. Methods

3.1. Population, Sample and Data Collection

This study targeted the modern Pentecostal Churches that appear to be posting their activities on social media more often. Social Media Research Group social media has emerged recently as an immediate source of data for research [25]. YouTube, a website established in 2005 has become one of the viable global public video-sharing platforms [1]. The researcher collected at random, 20 YouTube video-clips posted by different churches fall in the targeted category. Nevertheless, there were hundreds of relevant church videos available on YouTube; a random sampling approach was the most reliable technique to use to pick the required video-clips with all videos sharing the same chances to be selected [9]. Mondada argued that the collection of videos, such as YouTube video-clips and analysis had become a widespread practice in social science because video-clips represent the real-practice in social life [17].

3.2. Research Inclusion and Exclusion

The study included 20 church video-clips from across the World, exclusively in England, so that the investigator could understand and limit distortion of the data that could have affected the validity of the outcome [9]. Furthermore, included in this project were video-clips published from 2005, when YouTube was created. The researcher selected

video-clips that were up to an hour long and leave the longer video-clips. The inclusion and exclusion helped to define the scope of this study and improved the ultimate results [28].

3.3. Data Analysis

The researcher designed a framework that defines two categories; serve and leader, as illustrated in the literature that a servant leader should first *serve* before *leading* [11]. The framework had two columns; one to put words that are related to serving, and another with words that relate to the leader, thus *Column 1*: [You] and *Column 2*: [Me]. The framework was essential to direct the data analysis process [9]. Then, the biographies of the leaders on the video-clips were researched on the internet and documented first before analysing the video-clips. Checking the background of each leader was vital because it was used to cross-reference the

outcome identified by the two column framework to validate the outcome. Saunders et al. stated that validation makes the results transferable [23]. The video-clips were then transcribed into words before the researcher coded the transcripts putting the extracts into two columns. Again, transcribing the videos into documents was important for analysis, to understand what was said in the videos. Saunders et al. expressed that transcribing makes data analysis useful [23]. Finally, the actions presented in the video-clips that relate to leadership were analysed in each video and interpreted. The investigator again used the video-clips interpretations to cross-reference to validate the results from transcripts.

For ethical purposes, this article will neither review the names of the churches nor leaders included in this study.

Table 1. Data Presentation.

Churches	Leaders	Genders	Average Age of Leaders	Countries (Headquarters)	Min Video Time	Max Video Time	Average Video Time
20	20	Female 2 Male 18	Below 30 = 2 30 – 40 = 3 41 – 51 = 11 52 – 62 = 2 62+ = 2	America 3 Australia 1 Canada 2 Nigeria 4 South Africa 4 UK 3 Zimbabwe 3	32 mins	60 mins	55 mins

Table 1 shows the data collected on YouTube. The total videos collected were 20, with 20 leaders. However, the data indicates that men than women mostly occupy this profession; figures show 18 videos collected were male leaders, and only 2 were females, the female leaders were from America and Canada. Ages of leaders ranged from below 30 years to above 62, with the majority aged between 41 and 51 years. These video representations were drawn from 7 countries; America, Australia, Canada, Nigeria, South Africa, UK and Zimbabwe. Minimum time of videos picked was 32 minutes and a maximum of 60 minutes, with an average 55 minutes.

4. Results

Figure 1 below is the outcome after processing leaders' data. There were keywords which were looked for as part of the framework of this study, which was "me", "you" and "Jesus". "Me" emerged from 18 leaders, that means only two leaders did not mention the word in the video. In average, "me" was said nine times in each video (18 videos). In total, the word "me" was mentioned 216 times in these videos. However, the researcher classified some words, such as "I" in the same category with "me", with anticipation that they mean the same. The investigator assumed that when the leader mentioned "me", he or she was referring to self.

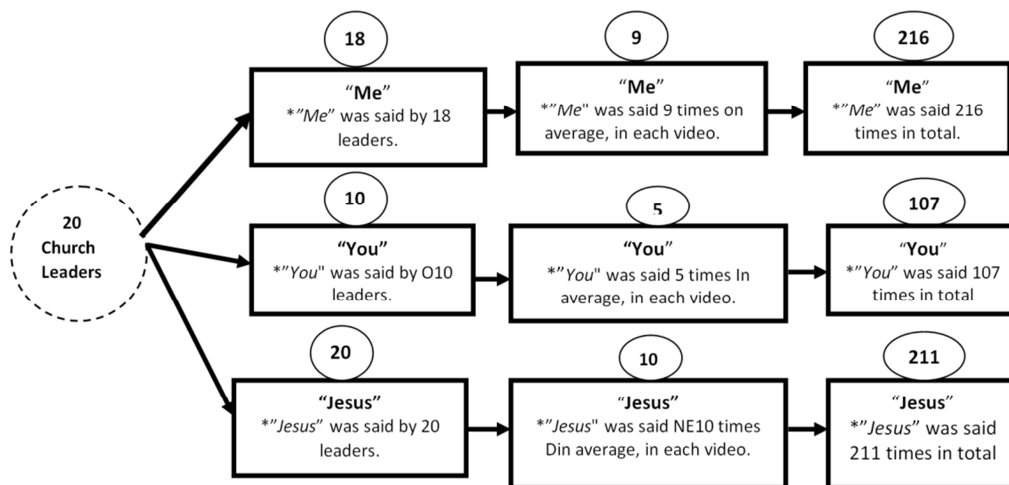


Figure 1. Leaders' data analysis.

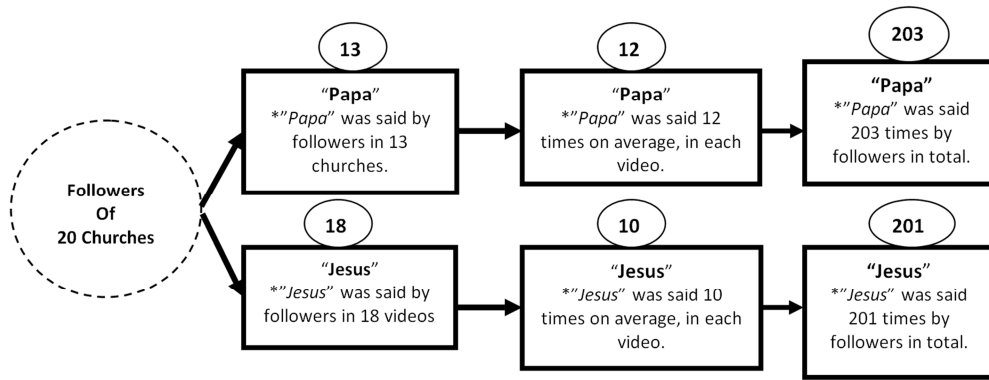


Figure 2. Followers' data analysis.

Furthermore, "You" was another word, but on the opposing frame, the researcher's assumption was "you" was referring to followers. The word "you" was mentioned by in 10 leaders, with an average of 5 times, in each video. In total, "you" was said 107 times. Then, the word "Jesus" was set as a mediator in the framework for this research. "Jesus" was mentioned in all videos (20) by leaders, with an average ten times in each video and total 211 times in all videos.

The analysis above shows that the word "me" was mentioned more as compared to "you" and "Jesus", thus 216, 107 and 211 respectively. The outcome indicates that "me" was said 40.45%, "Jesus" 39.5%, and "you" was mentioned 20.04% of the total, in the 20 videos.

Figure 2 above presents the data analysis of the followers in the 20 churches that were under study. The study picked two words that were complementary to the study framework, which was "papa" and "Jesus". The researcher assumed that "papa" was referring to the leader and went on to classify all words that meant the leader, such as "pastor", "father", "men of God", and "major". The word "papa" was mentioned in 13 out of 20 videos, with an average of 12 times per video. In total, "Papa" emerged 203 times in the whole data set. However, on the other side, the word "Jesus" was said in 18 videos out of 20, with an average of 10 times in those videos and the word was mentioned 201 in total.

5. Discussion

The objectives of the current study were to investigate the existence of servant leadership in modern churches, to understand the servant leadership practices in these organisations, and to evaluate the benefits of servant leadership in today's churches. The data from church leaders analysis (see figure 1 above), indicates that leaders tend to say "me" more than mentioning the word "Jesus" during their sermon; this argument is shown by the highest in frequency in the data analysis, the word "me" was used. In other words, these leaders were more concerned about themselves than their followers and Jesus. This outcome contradicts with the theory of servant leadership that stipulates that leaders should serve before being a leader [11]. This position as a servant leader should be a continuous stand that should be taken by leaders who are keen to develop their

followers, who are must be concerned about the welfare of their followers [22, 27]. However, the results presented by this study do not fulfil the Greenleaf's thinking of a servant leader [10, 11]. As servant leadership is referenced to Jesus' conduct; it is widely written that Jesus was a servant of God (e.g., Philippians 2:7; Isaiah 11:5, 42:1 and 53:11; Zechariah 3:8; John 4:34, and 9:4) [30]. The analysis outcome in figure 1 above indicates that the current leaders in modern churches mention the word "Jesus" less frequent than they call themselves. Therefore not clear whether they are servant leaders or not, and whom are they saving? In contrast, Philippians 2:7 mentioned that "Jesus took upon him the form of a servant", a humble servant of God, yet he was the son of God with the same nature of God, in other words, he was God himself, but voluntarily became the Servant of his father [30].

Also, results from figure 2 show the outcome of the followers' data analysis and followers in sermons say the word "papa" more than "Jesus". In other words, these results show that followers see their leader more than Jesus, which could be argued as a fact. However, this shift could be the foundation of the problems in these organisations. The current researcher sees a paradigm that can be explained by a mediation model.

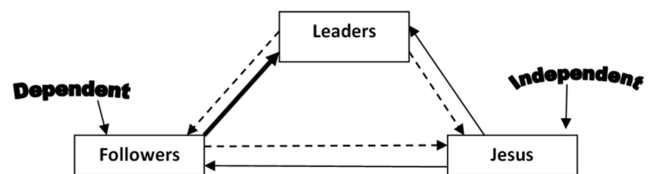


Figure 3. The Follower-Jesus Mediation Model.

The Mediation Model above can be drawn from the outcome of this study. The followers remain dependent variables in this model because they can be influenced by the factors outside them [9]. For Christians considered in this study, Jesus is their independent variable in this equation because he cannot be changed [9]. Hence, Hebrews 13:8 says "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever" [30]. The data confirmed that Jesus loves His people, as it is indicated by a reliable link to both Leaders and their followers. However, leaders and their followers have less focus on Jesus; dotted lines towards Jesus illustrate this.

Nevertheless, these church leaders also do have less consideration on followers; for example, some church leaders were accused of sexually inappropriate behaviour towards church congregants [31]. Spears suggested that church leaders should serve followers and have empathy, listening and stewards for followers [26]. Leaders are supposed to be mediators drawing followers to Jesus rather than to themselves, but the data analysis indicates that leaders have less concern about followers; the broken line. In opposite, followers have sold focus on their leaders, as shown by a sold link line on the model.

6. Limitations

This study is not immune to limitations, as any other research. Although the data collection was done at random; collecting YouTube videos at random, selection might have been biased because the sample indicated only two female against 18 male participants, though the reason could be more males are in this profession than females. Again, there were many videos each potential participant online and choosing only a sample of fewer hours and less might also point to biases. Gray argued that sample biases give other potential participants fewer chances [9]. However, the researcher was consistent with overcoming this issue by only choosing "sermons" from each participant, published from 2005.

7. Conclusion

This study concludes that servant leadership is less evidenced in practice, despite the long history of the theory, from Jesus Christ's time. The modern church leaders are finding it challenging to demonstrate servant leadership, and their focuses are selfish, despite Jesus loving them. Also, followers are focusing on their church leaders more than Jesus, and this followers' position has made these modern churches' leaders more selfish. Therefore, servant leadership do not exist in practice. However, more research is needed in different sectors to establish this position. Also, if further investigations are to be done in the same sector, should consider longitudinal study designs because of the nature of the phenomenon.

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