

Leadership in the post-COVID-19 work Environment: A Qualitative Study of Servant Leadership in an ICT Company

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Abstract: This study aimed to enhance understanding of servant leadership and its relevance given the worldwide turbulence that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Employees experienced uncertainties and complexities during and post the pandemic and the study investigated whether servant leadership is capable of delivering a leadership approach that can meet the challenges of the modern workplace. Servant leaders are those who place the needs of their subordinates before their own. The research examined the participants' conceptualisations of servant leadership by, firstly, exposing them to background information on this form of leadership, secondly soliciting managers' perspectives on servant leadership and, thirdly, investigating ways in which its principles and values can be applied in an ICT company. A qualitative research design was employed, with in-depth interviews conducted with 18 purposively selected managers. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The study found that the majority of participants embraced servant leadership principles and were motivated by serving employees' interests. An important finding was the relevance of explaining the concept of servant leadership prior to the interviews, which enabled participants who had no exposure to this concept to understand it. Servant leadership, which values collaboration and shared foresight while accepting accountability and challenging goals to maintain high work standards, was unanimously deemed a viable form of leadership that would benefit an organization if successfully implemented. The benefits identified by participants included employees feel valued and trusted, which motivates them to provide clients with quality service.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Trust, Values, Motivation, Training, Post-COVID Leadership

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic which emerged at the beginning of 2020 affected all aspects of everyday life and caused worldwide turbulence. As asserted by Dirani et al. (2020:380), "The challenge is that our worldviews of the order of things, what we thought we knew about the order of systems, is falling apart." Apart from being a global health concern, the virus altered the ways in which business was conducted and the daily lifestyles of individuals worldwide. Furthermore, it continues to challenge well-established, entrenched leadership models (Nicola et al. 2020). Kok and Van den Heuvel (2019:61) observe that, "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence. It is to act with yesterday's logic". In most organizations where 'remote working' – "work done outside of the four walls of the office" (Wyld 2022) is new for management, this shift has resulted in a different dynamic. While many employees find working remotely more productive than working in an office (Birkinshaw, Cohen, and Stach 2020), Wyld (2022) points out that no precedent or managerial guidebook existed to suddenly adopt new and effective management styles in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Leadership that serves others, invests in people's development, and fulfils a shared vision is desperately needed (Page and Wong 2000). Servant leaders are "those who place the needs of their subordinates before their own needs" (Liden, Wayne et al. 2008:163). Based on a systematic review of 39 empirical studies, Parris and Peachey concluded that "servant leadership is a viable leadership theory that helps organizations and improves the well-being of followers" (2013:377).

This study focussed on the Integrated Servant Leadership model developed by Gold and Walker (2020). The model comprises the three dimensions that are found in most academic literature on servant leadership, namely:

- Servant leadership orientation,
- Emotional intelligence, and
- Leadership competence.

The new world of remote work requires leaders who can connect, engage and trust their employees to work independently, despite not seeing them regularly. The question is whether servant leadership can resolve this challenge.

Most studies suggest that the information technology (IT) sector has secured an important position in the 21st century and expanded its market share in the global economy (Fisher 2005). The crisis engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to accelerate some workforce trends already underway, such as the adoption of automation and digitization as millions of employees were sent home with laptops and other digital technologies to work remotely (Lund, Cheng et al. 2020).

The study explored whether IT leaders' perspectives, practices, and values align with servant leadership, and determined the enabling factors and challenges they confront on a daily basis that hinder the application of this leadership style.

The researcher answered the research question by conducting semi-structured interviews with nominated line managers. Each participant was interviewed once, for 30 minutes to an hour. The semi-structured interview guide approved by the supervisor included the following questions:

- What are the participants' conceptualisations of servant leadership?
- What are the managers' perceptions of the implementation of the principles, practices and values of servant leadership?
- How can the principles and values of servant leadership be applied in the IT company?
- What are the enabling factors and challenges to the implementation of the principles of servant leadership?

While servant leadership has been extensively researched on other continents, very little is known about IT servant leadership in Africa, especially South Africa. The research thus contributes new knowledge to the study of servant leadership in the IT sector and its applicability in the modern era.

2. Literature Review

Research shows that several world-class organizations like Southwest Airlines, Vanguard Investment Group, Hobby Lobby, ID Industries, Starbucks, Steak-n-Shake, Synovus and Chick-Fil-A have embraced servant leadership principles and attribute their success to its principles, beliefs, and practices (Selladurai 2014; Parris and Peachey 2013; Harwardt 2020). Most studies point to a strong connection between servant leadership and effectiveness, productivity, morale, reduced employee turnover and trust (Anderson 2009; Babakus et al. 2011; Barbuto and Wheeler 2006).

A servant-leader can be defined as "a leader whose primary purpose for leading is to serve others by investing in their development and well-being for the benefit of accomplishing tasks and goals for the common good" (Wong, Davey et al. 2007; Wong, Hairon et al. 2019). Servant leadership has been widely discussed and researched and has gained much attention and momentum since Greenleaf introduced it in the 1970s.

In the past four decades, the concept of servant leadership has gained increased acceptance in the leadership and organizational literature, and has evolved as a leadership construct (e.g., Collins 2001; Covey 1994; Farling, Stone, and Winston 1999; Heifetz 1994; Senge 1997; Spears 1994; Wheatley 1994; Spears 1995; Lab 1999; Russel and Stone 2002; Patterson 2003; Ehrhart 2004; Barbuto and Wheeler 2006; Liden, Wayne, Zhao and Henderson 2008; Van Dierendonck and Nuijten 2011; Gold and Walker 2020).

According to Wong, Davey et al. (2007), servant leadership has the following characteristics:

- Leadership is characterized by humility and selflessness.
- Employee retention and development are top priorities for leaders.
- Servant leaders create a safe and positive workplace to foster innovation and enhance intrinsic motivation.
- Leadership of this type respects and treats subordinates with dignity, thus humanizing the workplace.
- By placing the legitimate needs of their followers ahead of self-interest, leaders earn their followers' trust.
- This leadership is based on putting the needs of workers and society before profit margins.
- Listening openly to one's employees is an important part of this type of leadership.
- By empathizing, being kind, healing, and possessing emotional intelligence, leaders can develop and maintain good relationships.
- These leaders value teamwork and involve others in decision-making so as to gain their support and cooperation.

- Human resource development and unleashing are key strategies to achieve organizational goals.

The benefits of servant leadership cited by different authors include:

- The focus on relationships positively impacts both employee satisfaction and output while creating an environment where employees are supported and participation is encouraged (Thompson 2002).
- The servant leader's ability to create a sense of accountability among his/her followers often leads to followers going above and beyond the call of duty (Selladurai 2014).
- Servant leaders promote high levels of job satisfaction, team effectiveness, and fulfilment of corporate goals and objectives in for-profit, highly demanding organizations (Selladurai 2014).
- Servant leadership helps educational leaders provide support and assistance to students, teachers, and their families by listening, trusting, empathizing, healing, and developing relationships (Spears 2004).
- Serving others through servant leadership is the best fit to establish trust and fulfil organizational participants' needs (Page and Wong 2000).
- Servant leaders improve performance in their organizations by engaging employees, building communities at work, and helping employees to find meaning so that they will be intrinsically motivated and perform at high levels. Servant leaders ensure their work environment encourages people to be more helpful and creative (Keith 2021).
- In a servant leadership structure, not only are associates' voices heard, but their ideas are communicated, disseminated, and implemented more easily to those in positions of leadership (Rank and Contreras 2021)
- Servant leaders engage with members of their teams on an on-going basis to ensure they are working in positions that are the best possible fit for their overall strengths and weaknesses (Savel and Munro 2017).

3. Research Methodology

An interpretivist philosophy underpinned the qualitative research method employed for this study. Adhabi and Anozie (2017) argue that a qualitative approach is best suited to understand the rich and varied aspects inherent to leadership. The purposeful sample consisted of 18 managers employed by an international ICT company based in Cape Town. In-depth interviews and documentation were employed to gather data due to their combined capability to obtain "a rich set of data" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2009:215) on the participants' conceptualisation of servant leadership. The interviews were designed to gain an understanding of the managers' perceptions of the implementation of the principles, practices and values of servant leadership as well as their reasons for adopting this form of leadership.

4. Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach was employed to codify the verbatim transcribed data based on an observation grid to identify units of meaning. The subsequent interpretation of the results "created meaning in the discourse" and highlighted the inferences (Silverman, 2014). The University of KwaZulu-Natal's College of Humanities Ethical Committee granted ethical approval for the research.

The participants were required to complete an online Google questionnaire prior to the interviews to assess their behaviours and actions with regard to servant leadership. The questionnaire was based on the Integrated Servant Leadership Model designed by Gold et al (2020) illustrated below.

Table 1: Gold et al (2020) questionnaire based on the Integrated Servant Leadership Model

| Servant Leadership Scale | | | | | |
|---|-------|--------|--------------------------------|-------|--------|
| Please read each statement carefully. Circle the number that represents your usual behavior for that statement. When you have responded to each behavior, total your score. The interpretation is provided. | | | | | |
| Behavior | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
| 1. I chose to serve through leadership. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Concern for others motivates me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. I prefer to serve anonymously, unrecognized. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. My leadership behavior is moral. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. A leader, I embrace truth, & accept feedback. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. I have faith or philosophy which guides me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. I respect diverse people & culture. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. I am aware of my emotions. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. I competently manage my emotions. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. I am aware and respect the emotions of others. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. I constructively manage my relationships. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. I am effectively work within and with different cultures. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. I empower peers and others around me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. I take reasonable risks to serve others | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. I am a responsible steward of that entrusted to me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. I competently meet my professional responsibilities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. I build effective communities & teams to serve others. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Total Score | | | | | |
| Excellent Servant Leader: 77-85 | | | Competent Servant Leader 60-67 | | |
| Proficient Servant Leader: 68-76 | | | Aspiring Servant Leader: < 59 | | |

Source: Gold et al (2020:7)

5. Research Findings

5.1 Managers’ Perceptions of Servant Leadership

The following figure depicts the results from the online questionnaire completed by participants. They show that the majority of participants (eight) were excellent servant leaders, seven were proficient servant leaders, two were competent servant leaders, and only one was an aspiring servant leader. Most surpassed the 60 point score in the servant leadership model, indicating that they embrace the dimensions described in the model.

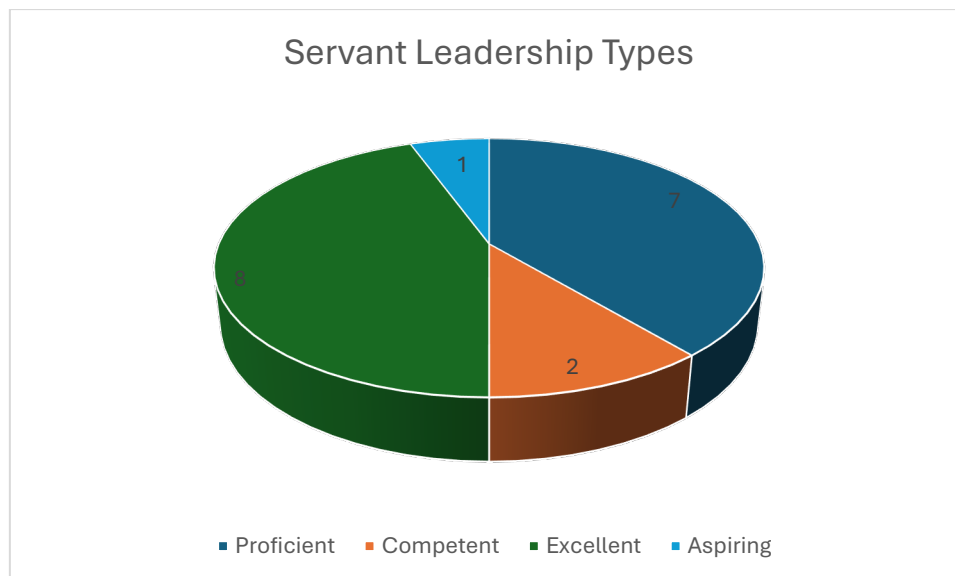


Figure 1

Source: Own Construction

Detailed analysis:

5.1.1 Males vs Females

More than 60% of the participants are male, which reflects the ratio of male to female line managers within the organization. Although some researchers attribute servant leadership to women who generally embrace human dimensions of thinking, the study suggests that men can integrate positive feminine behaviours without violating their gender roles.

5.1.2 Race

Is servant leadership colour blind? The vast majority of participants are white line managers. Nonetheless, the views on servant leadership cut across racial boundaries.

5.1.3 Reporting Lines

The participants ranged from managers with one employee reporting to them, to others with more than 100. However, they shared the same values and principles when it came to their perceptions of servant leadership.

5.1.4 Roles

The results revealed that, while there are a variety of roles within the organization, all of the participants share the same servant leadership practices, with the exception of one who did not initially comprehend the concept but was open to it once it was explained.

Themes that emerged from the data

Theme 1: Perceptions of what servant leadership is:

- The participants believed that this type of leadership replaces transactional behaviour with relational follower-serving behaviour that fosters trust, humility, growth, and accountability.
- Team members are empowered to express their opinions, and the leader engages with them in a collaborative manner.
- Servant leadership creates an enabling environment where workers are empowered, motivated and allowed to grow. This helps them to perform their roles more effectively. Leaders should encourage team members to make decisions that will positively affect their performance.
- A servant leader is one whose behaviour exemplifies ethical standards.
- For some individuals, servant leadership characteristics are a natural tendency and, like other natural tendencies, they can be honed and developed through learning and practicing to maximize their advantages (Spears 2010).

Theme 2: Motivating factor in your current role: Is it the people or getting a promotion?

According to Laub, leaders face two choices. "Do I lead to serve my own interests first? Or do I lead to serve the needs of those led before my own self-interest?" (2004:7).

The findings revealed that most participants are excellent servant leaders, motivated by serving the interests of people. The organization encourages its leaders to hold one-on-one conversations with their team members where they can voice their concerns in a safe environment. Although this practice is not measured, most participants agreed that these sessions develop a good relationship between leaders and employees, and they aim to hold them at least once a month.

Theme 3: Team collaboration versus individual winning, communication with team members and getting their buy-in

Research shows that servant leadership creates an environment that enables and promotes collaboration within a team (Garber et al. 2009; Irving and Longbotham 2007). A servant leader builds high-performing teams by understanding the strength and benefits of competent, engaged, and capable team members (Russell 2019).

The participants agreed that in order to be effective at work, they must work together, which means helping one another achieve both individual and organizational goals. As with all teams, however, there are always super performers who go above and beyond the call of duty. Celebrating these individuals can improve employee satisfaction, as it makes them feel appreciated.

Theme 4: Trusting workers' accountability versus managers exercising authority

From the participants' feedback, it appears that managers and supervisors seek to persuade employees rather than coerce them into adopting organizational goals and objectives. There was unanimous agreement that explaining some decisions and achieving their acceptance is the best way to gain consensus.

The concept of accountability aligns with Gunnarsdóttir's (2014) finding that the employees of a servant leadership organization are held accountable for their work and performance. Sousa and Van Dierendonck (2015) observed that accountability is a "lead" element of servant leadership (Ragnarsson, Kristjánsdóttir et al. 2018). An environment in which team members openly discuss expectations and even own up to their mistakes and failures will eliminate the need for leaders to exercise authority. The majority of the participants indicated that they typically rely on trust and employees' skills to accomplish team objectives and rarely impose their authority.

Theme 5: Mentoring and coaching team members with ease

Yukl notes that, "mentoring is a relationship in which a more experienced leader helps a less experienced protégé" (2010:388). The participants were of the view that mentoring and coaching can improve individual and overall employee performance and increase team engagement, especially in the technology sector where employees are always required to update their skills. The majority cited mentoring as a way to build and facilitate team members' growth and learning. When a leader coaches or mentors his/her subordinates, a foundation of trust is essential (Du Plessis and Nel 2015).

6. Discussion

Servant leaders are distinguished from other leaders by the values, principles, and practices they employ on a daily basis. The participants encouraged teamwork and collaboration and motivated team members to achieve goals and objectives. In the interviews, it was evident that these leaders aimed to get their followers to psychologically 'buy into' decisions. In addition, they stated that as leaders, they are always open to discussion when team members are not sure about what decisions to make or where they need guidance, in as much as they may not have the answers to all their questions.

Their responses suggest that the participants trusted their employees' opinions on critical issues. Good maintains that "nothing builds trust faster than a servant attitude" (2013:2); even when confronted by problems, people know their leader genuinely cares about them and has their best interests at heart. Almost all the participants felt that the organization emphasizes and supports good behaviour, and they rarely have to use authority to accomplish tasks since most people are responsible for their actions.

Regarding communication, the participants concurred that taking the time to communicate with team members in the form of team meetings and one-on-one conversations is very important. In addition to communication and collaboration, solociting the views of other team members and learning from them were also regarded as imperative.

According to the feedback provided, mentorship relationships exist within the organization, and there is an emphasis on helping people grow professionally. This environment promotes learning within the organization. The participants shared Stanley and Clinton's (1992) perspective that leaders are responsible for empowering their followers and helping them reach their full potential. Moreover, Van Dierendonck (2011) asserts that empowerment gives followers a sense of self-confidence in discharging their duties.

The responses suggest that there are always opportunities for team members to think outside the box, to create and obtain knowledge collectively, and to reflect on new knowledge and insights. A learning organization is one that continually grows its capacity to achieve the results it desires, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are cultivated, collective aspiration is unleashed, and people are continually learning how to learn together (Vat 2003). Senge (1990) popularized the notion of a learning organization in his seminal work, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. He proposed that "dynamic learning organizations are built and maintained by servant leaders who lead because they choose to serve" (1997:17). Senge stressed the importance of team learning as a foundation for organizational success. According to him, "if teams learn, they become a microcosm for learning throughout the organization" (1990:236). One way to implement this model is to hire leaders and organizational members who possess servant leadership qualities and to develop training programs to further develop these traits.

The following challenges were identified that could hinder servant leadership:

- Managers not embracing change brought about by servant leadership. Some managers continue to hold onto the perception that leadership is authority.
- Individuals who are required to work outside of their comfort zone or are thrown off their regular routine may not react well to such demands. Line managers indicated that, until 2020, there was no 'remote work' and when the COVID-19 pandemic began and the number of cases grew exponentially, some line managers remained convinced that they needed to see their staff members physically in the offices to believe that they were working. Their mindsets were forced to change to accept the 'new normal'.
- Managers' experience of staff members/workers not embracing change brought about by servant leadership. Given that individuals have different personalities, not everyone will appreciate a servant leader. It is possible for some to take advantage of the servant leader and become lax in their responsibilities. Others who perceive the leader as caring deeply about their needs may be tempted to put in less effort.
- Management of diversity based on age, race, culture, and gender. According to Irving (2010), the predominant culture plays a significant role in filtering acceptable behaviour, as well as determining what is unacceptable. Statistics South Africa (2018) reports that the labour market in South Africa remains dominated by historically privileged groups, and this has been a challenge for the organization. Indeed, 30 years after the establishment of democracy, racial and social discrimination remains prevalent in the South African work environment (McCallaghan, Jackson et al. 2020; Talbot and Durrheim 2012; Jaga et al. 2018).

7. Limitations

Given the COVID-19 protocols and restrictions in place when the research was conducted, the data were collected via video interviews. Other limitations included:

- The sample size of 18 participants is sufficient for a qualitative study. However, only the IT sector was included; thus, the results cannot be generalized to other sectors.
- Due to the lack of consideration of participants' work experience, the research may have captured a limited range of responses.

8. Conclusion

The study's findings suggest that organizations can benefit from servant leadership. However, in order to maximize its benefits, diversity in terms of race, culture, gender, and age needs to be addressed. This is a sensitive but crucial issue. Pekerti and Sendjaya (2010) note that perceptions of what constitutes a leader are different across cultures because most people of a given culture hold similar beliefs about the attributes of a typical leader and are exposed to similar organizational policies and practices. Irving (2010) and Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) are of the view that, as a way of respecting other cultures, people need to be interested in them, notice differences, and change their behaviour. According to Bhawuk and Brislin (1992), a variety of leadership styles or philosophies can be employed to cultivate cultural awareness and sensitivity, but servant leadership provides a platform to take into account followers' unique cultural perspectives. Nart, Yaprak et al.'s (2018) research showed that servant leadership has a strong effect on employees' perceptions of diversity. Managers can take advantage of servant leadership competencies for effective diversity management and to advance towards organizational goals. 'Post-COVID' is projected to be a time when remote work becomes the new normal. Today's technology can be used to effectively communicate and collaborate; as a result, leaders will need to manage intelligently to adapt to the new environment. An 'open ear policy' is urgently needed, as is empathizing with others and understanding their viewpoints as some employees will be fully remote.

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