

## **The Relationship Between the Servant Leadership Behaviors of Immediate Supervisors and Followers' Perceptions of Being Empowered in the Context of Small Business**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to measure the relationship between followers' perceptions of the servant leadership of their immediate supervisor and followers' sense of empowerment in the context of small businesses. A quantitative survey was completed by 116 employees of small businesses, including measures of supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and followers' self-perceived empowerment. Followers' perceptions of being empowered were found to correlate positively with their ratings of the servant leadership behaviors of immediate supervisors. The findings support the researchers' assertions that followers' perceptions of being empowered will increase as supervisors' servant leadership behaviors increase.

The power of servant leadership lies in the leader's ability to unleash the potential and thus the power in those around them. Greenleaf (1977) ascribed greatness to the leader's attention to followers, "When it is genuine, the interest in and affection for one's followers that a leader has is a mark of true greatness" (p. 34). In the foreword to the Anniversary edition of Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership*, Covey (2002) related empowerment to servant leadership. He acclaimed the importance of empowerment to the sustainable success of organizations in the 21st century. Organizations structured to support and encourage the empowerment of their employees will thrive as market leaders (Covey, 2002). While other leadership styles have been found to empower followers, it is agreed across current literature, that the focus on developing and empowering the follower as their primary concern is specific to servant leaders (Greenleaf,

1977; Parolini, Patterson, & Winston, 2009; Parris & Peachey, 2012; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; van Dierendonck, 2011).

The context chosen for the study was small business because of the crucial role it plays regarding job growth in the United States (Howard, 2006) and in “enriching the lives of men and women of the whole world” (Kayemuddin, 2012, p. 27). Servant leadership enables small business leaders to fully discover, develop, and employ follower potential through empowering behaviors.

This study sought to contribute to the empirical research of servant leadership by measuring the relationship between supervisors’ servant leadership behaviors and followers’ perceptions of empowerment within the context of small business.

## **Servant Leadership**

In 1970 Greenleaf (1977) recognized and wrote about a leadership crisis: “We live at a time when holders of power are suspect, and actions that stem from authority are questioned” (p. 15). Yet he believed the constructs of power and authority were beginning to be reviewed and revised. He observed more natural servants challenging injustice and noted that servant leadership requires leaders to practice ethics, virtues, and morality (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf’s (1970) words are frequently cited in defining servant leadership, suggesting that servant leadership:

“... begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead ... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant - first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?” (p. 15).

Greenleaf (1977) refers to leadership as an art, to servant leadership as the fabric of the leader, and to the leader’s servant nature as the essence of the servant leader’s real person. His conceptualization of servant leadership as a philosophy instead of a technique made the theory difficult to operationalize and is possibly the reason for the plethora of models produced as well as the slow rate of acceptance in academia (Parris & Peachey, 2012). Hu and Liden (2011) stated, “Although it preceded the most popular contemporary leadership theories, servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) has received relatively less attention in the academic literature, making it necessary to distinguish servant leadership from other major leadership theories” (p. 853). Despite the lack of original acceptance, the viability of the servant leadership theory was supported by Parris and Peachey (2012) in their systematic literature review and the growing body of research and publications in the last two decades.

Buchen (1998) explained that follower empowerment in servant leadership occurs at the point at which leaders subdue or eliminate their ego and embrace the notion of *primus inter pares*—first among equals; followers become collaborators. Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999)

attributed values such as justice, equality, and human rights to servant leaders and concluded that “servant leaders find that the empowerment of followers serves as the means to act on those values” (p. 67). Greenleaf (1977) described the best test of a servant leader as being the extent of development experienced by those they serve. The influence of the servant leader will result in “healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous [followers], more likely themselves to become servants” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 27).

Empowering subordinates was a consistent factor found in each of the servant leadership models presented by the studies of Page and Wong (2000), Russell (2001), and Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson, (2008). According to Patterson (2003), a transformational leader’s primary focus is the organization’s goals while the servant leader’s primary focus is developing the follower. Empowerment means letting people do their jobs by enabling them to learn, grow, and progress. By empowering followers, servant leaders are allowing them freedom to proceed toward their goals, helping them make their dreams a reality. Patterson’s understanding that empowerment of employees creates an impact that reaches beyond the organization brings the discussion of servant leadership and empowerment back to one of Greenleaf’s original identifiers. Greenleaf (1977) identified servant leaders as those who use their power and authority to build a better society.

## **Empowerment**

The importance of empowerment to organizations in today’s environment of constant change was emphasized by Spreitzer (1995): “Interest in empowerment comes at a time when global competition and organizational change have stimulated a need for employees who can take initiative, embrace risk, stimulate innovation, and cope with high uncertainty” (p. 1448).

**Structural Empowerment.** In the same year Greenleaf was writing about ineffective leadership behaviors, Kanter (1977) was writing about the ineffectiveness of bureaucratic behavior in organizations. She wrote, “A major cause of ineffective, stereotypically ‘bureaucratic’ behavior is seen to lie in the extent to which too few people are empowered in large organizations” (Kanter, 1977, p. 6). Her solution: “a wider sharing of power” (Kanter, 1977, p. 6). Rather than domination, power was defined by Kanter (1977) as the ability to do the job. The ability to do the job was defined by the follower’s access to appropriate power and the required resources. Empowering environments allowed access to the resources needed to accomplish organizational goals as well as access to opportunities for growth and development of knowledge and skills (Miller, Goddard, & Laschinger, 2001).

Kanter (1977) argued that effectiveness in organizations was facilitated by leaders who create structures designed to share power (both formal and informal). According to Kanter, as discussed by Miller et al. (2001), work environments structured to empower are designed for follower access to “information, support, and resources necessary to accomplish work is available, as well as those that provide opportunities for growth and development of knowledge and skills” (p. 1881).

**Psychological Empowerment.** Conger and Kanungo (1988) defined empowerment as the process of identifying and removing conditions that foster powerlessness using efficacy

information. They argued that it was not enough for leaders to create empowering environments; followers needed to perceive their empowerment and act upon it. An individual's perception of being empowered leads to self-determination or self-efficacy. Psychological empowerment resulted in "both initiation and persistence of subordinates' task behavior" (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 476). To further Conger and Kanungo's theory, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) define psychological empowerment as a type of motivation and identified by four cognitions that enhanced follower intrinsic task motivation. The first cognition is meaning. Meaning is defined as the value or purpose of work judged by the follower in relation to their personal values. Second is competence, or self-efficacy. Competence was related to the follower's perception of their ability to perform their assigned tasks. The third cognition is self-determination, or the follower's sense of having choice in initiating or regulating actions. The last is impact, explained as the degree to which a follower can influence outcomes (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995).

In 1995 Spreitzer introduced the Psychological Empowerment Instrument (PEI) designed to measure psychological empowerment using the four cognitions presented by Thomas and Velthouse (1990). Spreitzer (1995) wrote that Conger and Kanungo (1988) defined empowerment as the motivational concept of self-efficacy. She found that Thomas and Velthouse (1990) expanded the concept of empowerment from a single motivational concept to a multifaceted motivational concept manifested in four cognitions. The four cognitions represent active rather than passive orientations to work roles (Spreitzer, 1995).

Laschinger, Gilbert, Smith, and Leslie (2010) define empowerment as "a response to working in structurally empowering work environments and consist[ing] of four components: autonomy, self-efficacy, a sense of job meaningfulness, and the ability to have an impact in the organization" (p. 7). Their definition combines both theoretical streams of empowerment: structural (Kanter, 1977) and psychological (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995).

## **Small Business**

Successful small businesses account for a large part of the U.S. economy. They account for over 50% of the workforce (U.S. Small Business Administration, n.d.) and play an important role in the relationship between leaders and followers across the nation. Prior to the financial crisis of 2008, small companies were the primary source of job growth and created and employed more than 50% of private sector jobs (Howard, 2006). Marcketti and Kozar (2007) stated, "The importance of new firm formation is well recognized as an important source of job creation and economic development" (p. 142).

There has been little written about small business leaders and servant leadership, and according to Wang and Poutziouris (2010), "research on leadership in the small business domain remains immature" (p. 350). They also found that "owner-managed businesses characterized by delegation of authority appear to achieve higher growth in sales and operationalize [described as business growth performance] in a more professional way" (Wang & Poutziouris, 2010, p. 331). Valdiserri and Wilson (2010) found that in small businesses, as with large organizations, leadership plays a crucial role in employee effectiveness and organizational success. Marcketti

and Kozar (2007) found that small organizations are most effective when they are learning environments, with leaders who foster a framework of purpose, ethics, inclusion, and empowerment.

McCallum (2001) stated that the ability to adapt will ultimately determine the fate of enterprises. However, Senge (1990) indicated that adaption is not enough. Organizations have to engage in generative learning. While adapting, or dealing with current environmental changes, organizations must also be engaged in creation for the future. Senge characterized the leaders of organizations that engage in adaptive and generative learning as *pioneers*, a quality that Russell (2001) associated with servant leaders.

Over 50% of all workers employed in the United States are employed by small businesses (U.S. Small Business Administration, n.d.). The success of both large and small business depends on empowering employees. Various guidelines are provided by the U.S. Small Business Authority on what defines a small business, which include number of receipts and number of employees. Typically small businesses are considered to have less than 500 employees, but the Small Business Administration uses 50 as the maximum in some industries. The European Union also uses 50 as the defining size of a small business (European Commission, 2003). This study defined small businesses as having 50 employees or less. This number was applied throughout the study as the initial sample of small businesses sampled were all smaller than 50 and it was desirable to limit additional variance created by including larger organizations in the later sampling phases (details below). This study was designed to examine the relationship between small business employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership and their self-perceived empowerment levels.

## Methodology

A quantitative survey was used to collect the data. The survey consisted of two instruments. The first instrument was the Essential Servant Leadership Behaviors (ESLB), which measures the follower's perception of their immediate supervisor's observable servant leadership behaviors: the independent variable. The second instrument, measuring the dependent variable, was the Conditions of Work Effectiveness Questionnaire II (CWEQ II), which measures the followers' perceptions of being empowered or empowerment.

## Measures

The ESLB scale (Winston & Fields, n.d.) was chosen for its design, brevity, and reliability. The instrument was designed to measure behaviors identified as unique to servant leaders. The questions address behaviors that are easily observed by any follower so that knowledge of servant leadership theory is not required. The ESLB scale (Winston & Fields, n.d.) consists of 10 questions that required the participants to identify their observations of their immediate supervisor's servant leadership behaviors based on a 5-point Likert scale. The rating scale choices are: 1 = *definitely no*, 2 = *no*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *yes*, and 5 = *definitely yes*.

In this study the ESLB instrument returned a Cronbach alpha of .90 indicating a high internal reliability. This study's alpha of .90 added evidence of the instrument's reliability

demonstrating consistency with the original alpha of .96 calculated by Winston and Fields (n.d.). Winston and Fields reporting a correlation of .84 ( $p < .01$ ) between the ELSB and Liden et al.'s (2008) established measure of servant leadership as evidence of the convergent validity.

Laschinger et al.'s (2001) CWEQ II was chosen because it "extends an existing model of workplace empowerment and integrates Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory of structural power in organizations and Spreitzer's (1995) notion of psychological empowerment" (Laschinger et al., 2010, p. 5). The CWEQ II was designed by Laschinger et al. (2001) to measure followers' perceptions of their empowerment in the workplace. The 19 questions are divided across six subscales representing perceived access to opportunity, information, support, resources, formal power, and informal power. After consultation with Laschinger and other experts, four items were adapted for use in corporate context, as the CWEQ II was originally developing for the nursing field. In this study the six subscales of opportunity, resources, information, support, formal power, and informal power resulted in Cronbach alphas of .77, .67, .86, .77, .62, and .76 respectively. The alphas indicated a strong internal reliability and consistency with the alphas reported by Laschinger (2012) for the six subscales of opportunity, resources, information, support, formal power, and informal power as .81, .80, .89, .84, .69, and .67 respectively.

## Data Collection

A combined purposive and snowball sampling method was used to access small business employees located in California. The target population was workers who meet the criteria of being at least 18 years of age and employed at a small business (50 employees or less). Participants willing to take the survey were identified using two methods. The first involved identifying business owners, through personal and professional contacts, willing to take part in the study by requesting participation from their individual employees; the owners themselves did not participate in the survey. Additional adult business students working for small businesses were recruited from a specific Californian college campus, after permission was granted by the college. The study was approved by the institutional review board prior for the data collection. The survey link was then sent to possible participants. Both business owners and small business employees recruited on campus were asked to send the link to possible participants; the total amount of surveys sent out is approximately 156. Of the 130 surveys received, 116 were usable (fewer than 3 items incomplete).

## Results

The Pearson Product-Moment (PPM) correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) was used to measure the relationship between the participant's perceptions of their supervisor's servant leadership and overall empowerment, as well as each empowerment subscale. The level of significance ( $p$ ) was set at the most frequently used value of .05. The magnitude of the effect of the  $r$  calculated was measured using Cohen's (1988) scale of small (0.1), medium (0.3), and large (0.5) (Cohen, 1988). The Pearson Product-Moment (PPM) correlation coefficient produced the positive correlation of .57 ( $N = 116$ ,  $p = .00$ ) between the two variables of servant leadership behaviors of an immediate supervisor and perceived follower empowerment.

To avoid a Type I error, a power analysis tested whether the correlation coefficient between the two main variables being measured in the sample population differed from a hypothesized value of zero. The analysis was completed for the correlation ( $r = .57$ ) between the overall CWEQ II and ESLB scores with the alpha level of .05. The sample size of 116 resulted in a power of 100%, (using Howell, 2013) suggesting the sample size was more than adequate to support the correlation found.

The correlation of .57 represent the relationship between the overall scores calculated from data gathered by each instrument; ESLB (measuring servant leadership behaviors) and CWEQ II (measuring perceived empowerment). Positive correlations were also found between the overall servant leadership behaviors of an immediate supervisor and each subscale of the follower's perceived empowerment. The correlation of each subscale with servant leadership behaviors are represented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Relationship Between Supervisor's Servant Leadership Behaviors and Follower Empowerment*

	Opportunity	Information	Support	Resources	Formal power	Informal power	Total empowerment
<i>SLB</i>	.22*	.59*	.52*	.45*	.39*	.23*	.57*
N	116	114	115	114	115	116	116

*Note.* SLB is Servant Leadership Behaviors

\* $p < .05$

## Discussion and Findings

This study's overall results support the view, made by both the general community of scholars and by the authors of this study, that servant leaders empower their followers. It adds to the study of servant leadership by demonstrating that servant leadership behaviors have a strong correlation with followers' perceptions that they are empowered, although causality cannot be assumed. The study shows that servant leadership behaviors have strong correlations with followers' perceptions of both structural empowerment and the psychological empowerment of followers.

Current literature agrees that the primary focus on the follower is the distinguishing characteristic of servant leadership theory. Empowering the follower is the primary concern of the servant leader (Greenleaf, 1977; Parolini et al., 2009; Parris & Peachey, 2012; Stone et al., 2004; van Dierendonck, 2011). The relationship between a supervisor's servant leadership and the six different facets of empowerment is discussed next.

The followers' perceptions of being empowered through access to opportunity produced a correlation of  $r = .22$  ( $p = .02$ ) with the perceptions of their supervisors' servant leadership. This result is important because servant leadership was not previously related to the access to opportunity facet of empowerment. The significance of the lower correlation between opportunity and servant leadership behaviors may lie in the difference between how the

constructs are associated with observable behaviors or methods of application. Kanter (1977) defined empowerment as having two main structures within organizations: opportunity and power. The structure of power was then identified with specific methods of application: information, support, and resources (Laschinger et al., 2010). Access to information, support, and resources may provide more tangible and immediate outcomes and therefore perceivable empowerment. Servant leaders may create opportunities for followers. However, opportunity may be less tangible, immediate, and observable by followers resulting in a low perception of empowerment.

In this study, the importance of followers' access to information is discussed in terms of information as a power base as well as the ability to accomplish assignments. Access to valid information is needed to be effective in the organization; it generates the ability to act quickly, making it possible to accomplish more (Kanter, 1977). Access to information produced a correlation of  $r = .59$  ( $p = .00$ ) between the follower's perceived empowerment and the perception of their immediate supervisor's servant leadership behaviors. This correlation suggests that the follower's perception of empowerment is related to the type and quality of information that servant leaders are believed to make available to followers.

The more a person is seen as an expert or having information, the more influence he or she is perceived to possess (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Levi (2011) asserted that "the success of empowerment is directly related to the organization's willingness to share information and power with its employees" (p.138). Servant leaders would conceivably empower followers by ensuring access to needed information.

Support is described as critical feedback (or information) that allows the follower to maximize effectiveness (Kanter, 1977). A correlation and significance of  $r = .52$  ( $p = .00$ ) was found between follower's perceived empowerment through access to support and immediate leader's servant leadership behaviors. This is noteworthy because support is described by researchers as a type of information. This result may demonstrate that servant leaders are consistent in their use of behaviors that create access to the feedback and support needed for followers to perceive they are empowered.

The relationship between the followers' perceptions of being empowered through access to resources and their supervisor's servant leadership behaviors produced a correlation of  $r = .45$  ( $p = .00$ ). This finding provides evidence of the servant leaders' behavior of sharing power. Morgan (2006) contended that "power rests in controlling resources on which the organization is dependent for current operations or for creating new initiatives" (p. 170). Followers perceive that servant leaders provide access to the resources (e.g., technology) they need to be successful. This study suggests that the power of information is abated if the required resources do not accompany it. Assigning a task without providing resources is a recipe for failure (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

The propensity of servant leaders to share power may account for the strength in the correlation between servant leadership behaviors and the empowerment facet of formal power. The followers' access to formal power produced a correlation of  $r = .39$  ( $p = .00$ ) with supervisor's servant leadership behaviors. The significance of this result is that it validates the noncoercive use of power attributed to servant leaders by theoretical scholars. Servant leaders



use less institutional power and control while shifting authority to followers (Northouse, 2010). The excessive use of formal power and the hierarchy to achieve results is not characteristic of servant leaders or the way they would empower others to become servant leaders.

The followers' perceptions of being empowered through access to informal power produced a correlation of  $r = .23$  ( $p = .01$ ) with the ESLBs they observed in their immediate supervisor. This result signifies that servant leaders' behaviors have a weaker connection to informal power. Understanding why the correlation between servant leadership behaviors and informal leadership power is so small may be found in Morgan's (2006) definition: "The coalitions, alliances and networks built through these processes may remain highly informal and to a degree invisible" (p. 181). The concept of "invisible power" reengages Conger and Kanungo's (1988) question with a twist: If power is invisible, will the followers perceive they have been empowered? In addition, informal power is also linked to individual follower traits such as personality and charisma. These follower traits may have a greater influence on their ability to create access to informal power compared to their leader's servant leadership.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study imply that the theory of servant leadership includes behaviors that provide followers with both structural and psychological empowerment. The essential behaviors unique to servant leaders create both structural empowerment described by Kanter (1977) and psychological empowerment defined by Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990). The results suggest that the servant leader innately understands that the follower's perception of being empowered is necessary for the servant leader's empowering behaviors to be effective. Servant leadership uses power but maybe not all types of power equally. Some forms of power are seemingly less compatible with servant leadership (e.g., coercive power).

This study offers employers the ability to create sustainable success at operational levels of their organizations by employing leaders who demonstrate servant leader behaviors or by training leaders to use servant leader behaviors. The servant leadership behaviors of small business leaders empower followers to reach and increase their potential in the workplace. Servant leadership benefits the follower, the leader and the organization. The importance of leadership is critical to all organizations, small and large. Small business leaders provide environments where followers were empowered to develop and succeed (McKinney, 2009). The tendency of servant leaders to produce other servant leaders benefits society as a whole.

### **Limitations**

The sample's geographic area was confined to two counties located in California limiting the generalizability of the results to similar populations. Response bias occurs when respondents do not accurately represent the whole sample population: non-respondents' answers would have changed the overall results (Creswell, 2009; Huck, 2000). This is relevant to this sample as a volunteer sample was used.

## Future Studies

Future studies might explore contexts other than small business. Recent researchers like McKinney (2009) state that empowering “leadership is as imperative to small enterprises as to large corporate enterprises” (p. 3). Both Kanter (1977) and Greenleaf (1977) studied their concepts of servant leadership and empowerment in the context of larger organizations; they were unsure of the concepts’ applicability to smaller organizations. Repetition and extension of the present study may also be valuable, including consideration of mediating and moderating variables. Future research in the context of larger organizations could solve the question of the impact of organization size on these the identified relationships. This study found that the six subscales of overall empowerment (CWEQ II)— opportunity, information, support, resources, formal power, informal power—produced different correlations with the overall servant leadership behaviors (ESLB). Future studies could be conducted to examine why the subscales correlate differently, including qualitative exploration using interviews.

## Conclusions

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s turbulent organizational landscape, employers are reliant upon employees to be creative, autonomous, and decision makers. Empowerment studies have shown that empowered employees meet this requirement. The implication of this study is that overall empowerment in organizations may be related to the servant leader behaviors exhibited by their immediate supervisors, especially in the areas of access to information, support, resources, and formal power. Therefore, perceptions of empowerment may be enhanced by encouraging servant leadership behaviors through training or learning activities that aid leaders in becoming servant leaders.

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