





Servant Leadership Through the Eyes of Followers – the Case of Bulgaria

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Abstract: *The current paper focuses on presenting the essence of servant leadership and its characteristics. What is more, it aims also to discuss and analyse how employees perceive the characteristics of servant leadership. For this purpose, the perception that Bulgarian employees have of servant leadership has been presented as well as discussed in the paper. The authors used a quantitative approach and created a questionnaire using Qualtrics which was distributed to Bulgarian employees from both international and Bulgarian companies working in different sectors such as construction, call centers, IT, education, health care and others. The study had 94 participants, whose answers were analysed using Excel and SPSS. The result of the study shows that servant leadership attributes of community development, empathy, humility, moral integrity, employee development, and egalitarianism were perceived by Bulgarian employees as being important for leadership success.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Servant leadership is defined as a leadership that is oriented towards the service to others with main concept of placing employees first and developing them to be the best version of themselves both in the organization and society. Such types of leaders are fully devoted to the followers, which begins as a natural feeling of purpose that the servant leaders feel to serve (Kangoma, 2023).

Ingram (2016) considers that the servant leadership dates from 600 B.C. For example, at that time a Chinese Philosopher Lao Tzu discussed servant leadership by writing that the greatest leader forgets himself and serves the development of others.

The concept of “Servant Leadership” was first used in the study of Robert K. Greenleaf, in 1970. According to Greenleaf, the leader should not only be an example for followers but also teach them how to be good followers. Followership is essential for successful leadership. Only good followers can become effective leaders. In his studies, Greenleaf mentioned these archetypes constitute 2 extreme values and that there can be many intermediate stages and combinations, due to the infinite diversity of human nature (Dimitrakaki, 2023).

Servant leadership is a leadership style that has been gaining a lot of attention in the literature, as this leadership style is seen as a solution to the challenge that leaders have to have a style of leading that is more caring towards employees (Kangoma, 2023).

Servant leadership affects positively employees as the working environment is positive, the leader seeks contribution from the employees, they have the opportunity to express an opinion and thus creating a creative and innovative environment (Kangoma, 2023).

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It is the opposite of the style of the authoritarian or toxic leader who does not tolerate other's opinions and makes the whole working environment negative and toxic by nature.

Servant leaders build trust as they focus on positive and real relationship-building with followers. The positive orientation of the servant leader towards the needs and interests of staff builds a motivating culture and affects them positively.

Unlike authoritarian leaders who provoke fear and mistrust, servant leaders are persuasive by a strong focus on persuasion, rather than positional authority, by creating influence and driving decision-making, seeking to convince others (not coerce them), and working to build consensus on their teams so that everyone is a part of the decision-making process ([Business Leadership Today, n.d.](#)).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Different authors present various attributes of servant leaders. According to Greenleaf, the most important characteristic of being a servant leader is to make it your priority to serve rather than to lead. Servant leaders are more interested in serving the needs of employees and helping them grow in the organization and are less interested in focusing on profits and simply leading people along by telling them what to do ([Patterson, 2003](#)).

According to Spears, the servant leader is empathic, listening, healing, awareness, persuasive, conceptualizing, foresight, stewardship, and is committed to the growth of people and building community.

In their study, [Barbuto and Wheeler \(2006\)](#) have transformed Spears's 10 characteristics to: altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship.

On the other hand, Farling et al. (1999) presented a hierarchical model of servant leadership as a process, including behavior (vision, service) as well as relational (influence, credibility, trust) components as cited by [Barbuto and Wheeler \(2006\)](#).

Leaders nowadays are facing the challenge of working with people from different cultures and nationalities. To be successful, they should place the needs of their subordinates in the first place as servant leaders do. In addition, leaders are supposed to be ethical concerning avoiding possible conflicts arising from intercultural differences ([Kangoma, 2023](#)). These challenges mean that leaders are going to have to embrace a different leadership style, one that has high ethical standards, sensitive to current issues, and puts employees first. Servant leadership is a leadership style that has been proposed as a leadership process that answers these challenges that are presented to leaders ([Kangoma, 2023](#)):

- Person of character: As the leader serves as a role model, the behavior displayed should be based on the ethical rules of a humble person.
- Places people first: A servant leader unlike the narcissist leader is interested in employees' needs and demonstrates real care for its staff.
- Excellent communicator: Being not only able to speak well but most of all able to effectively listen to and speak with employees, while also inviting feedback.
- Compassionate collaborator: Consistency while working with others and working to strengthen relationships by demonstrating strong support for their well-being and successful problem-solving skills.
- Visionary: Future-oriented with a strong vision for the organization and the type of person who can take decisive action when needed.

- Systems thinker: Good adaptability to fit different situations and circumstances to effectively lead change in the organization.
- Leads with moral authority: trustworthy by establishing quality standards, accepting, and delegating responsibility and fostering a culture that allows for accountability (Society for Human Resource Management, n.d.).
- Egalitarianism. Servant leadership has the notion that the leader is one of the group he/she leads and all group members can help and depend on each other to accomplish the mission of the organization (Tanno & Banner, 2018).
- Empathic. Servant leadership shows attention to the specific needs as well as expectations of the followers thus being ready to show help if needed. In this regard, the servant leader to be able to be approached by the employees for them to share their concerns and struggles (Spears, 2004, as cited in Kangoma, 2023). In this process, the servant leader actively listens to employees, understands their concerns and worries, and places himself in other's shoes which enables the servant leader to guide instruct, and support followers in any problematic situation (Kangoma, 2023).
- Stewardship. Stewardship involves preparing the organization and its members for great contributions to society (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Leaders seek to meet the needs of society more than those of the organization.
- Empowerment is the most typical characteristic of the servant leader. Unlike toxic leaders who demonstrate superiority over subordinates, the servant leader delegates authority to them as Yordanova and Dineva (2022) discuss. The servant leader is mainly involved in active communication, places followers first, and makes them feel important by focusing on teamwork and valuing love and equality (Kangoma, 2023).
- Altruism demonstrated by SL is measured not only in good intentions or being well-meaning but presented more in concern for the welfare of another (Patterson, 2003).
- Servant leadership is strengthened when a leader performs the role of a servant when dealing with followers (Dimitrakaki, 2023).

The benefits of using SL as a leadership style on behalf of the employees are the following:

- A positive relationship between a leader and a subordinate with a priority for the welfare and development of subordinates rather than acting self-interested or focusing exclusively on the outcome, while sharing power as well (Patterson, 2003);
- Servant leadership creates a positive working environment of trust for both sides (Kangoma, 2023).
- Positive job satisfaction of employees and commitment towards the organization, as employees feel valued by the organization (Kangoma, 2023).
- Improves the mental health of employees, due to them having a safe space to share their struggles (Kangoma, 2023).
- The servant leader helps others by delegating authority to followers so that they can grow and develop themselves in the organization (Kangoma, 2023);
- Servant leadership is focused on improving employees' skills to do their jobs with high quality and reach their potential (Tanno & Banner, 2018);
- Trust is a very typical trait for SL due to the inspiration of others as well the empathy they show towards employees and support to help their growth (Patterson, 2003).

The benefits of SL for the organization are listed below such as:

- A possible and expected increase in its competitiveness and job engagement on behalf of the employees who are also satisfied with the job performed and committed to the organization due

to the servant leadership taking care of the future development of employees, this helps in the organization retaining their talents which reduces cost that may come due to turnover rate (Kangoma, 2023). The development of employees leads to a culture of learning within the organization, which helps the organization to be a step ahead in the market (Kantharia, 2011).

- Servant leadership engages the organization in Corporate social responsibility initiatives with a concern for the well-being of the planet, this behavior that servant leadership displays enables the organization to be able to answer to the demand that has been placed in today's market, which helps the organization increase its attractiveness to customers (Kantharia, 2011).
- Employees are also engaged in organizational environmental citizenship behavior (OECB), further benefiting the organization (Kangoma, 2023).
- Servant leadership can strongly influence individual-level and group-level results, suggesting that the servant leadership style is effective at all organizational levels. In addition, the findings highlight the crucial role of servant leaders in fostering a positive work environment and creating a high level of group and individual performance (Kangoma, 2023).

An interesting comparison of the models has been performed by Ingram (2016). According to him, the concepts of servant leadership are closely linked to leadership traits, characteristics, and behaviors. In this regard, Ingram (2016) has discussed six models. For example, Laub's six scales for servant leadership are focused on the leader who values people, develops people, builds community, displays authenticity, provides leadership, and shares leadership—can be viewed as they relate to the characteristics forming the conceptualizations of servant leadership in the models described by Greenleaf, Spears, Farling, Stone, Winston, and Ingram (2016).

Another notable approach to servant leadership is presented in Patterson's model, which identifies seven key constructs of this leadership style.

- *Agapao love*; means to act in love, to carry out caring things, or to act caringly. Patterson (2003) originated the idea of Agapao love for her model of servant leadership. As stated by Patterson (2003) "This love is shown by leaders who consider each person as a total person with needs, wants and desires" (Earnhardt, 2008).
- *Acts with humility*;
- *Is altruistic*;
- *Is visionary for the followers*; The leader has a vision for the future of the organization he/she leads;
- *Is trusting*; It is very important to have followers ready to accept the leadership,
- *Is serving*; The leader is ready to serve the followers by placing their needs in the first place;
- *Empowers followers*. The leader being transformational is democratic as allows followers to express ideas and make decisions.

Modified Wong & Page's expanding ring model with its core, including the love for humanity which expands through character building for the self and developing others.

Spears's Model presented ten characteristics of servant leaders, including listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building community (Kantharia, 2011).

Winston's Extension of Patterson Model by adding the followers' Agapao with a strong focus on the relationship between the Leader & Follower's Agapao.

Farling, Stone, and Winston present leadership with the leadership building trust, providing service to followers, and affecting the vision and influence on them (Ingram, 2016).

For Ingram's model the servant leader is the one who provides credibility, focuses on building relationships with followers, affects them with his vision and encourages them (Ingram, 2016).

Leader-Exemplary Follower Exchanges (LEFX). Based on the model, SL has various dimensions that demand systems thinking and a holistic approach. In this regard, Pitron believes that leaders are responsible for only 20% of the work done whereas the rest of the work is performed by the followers and greater contribution is by exemplary followers (Kantharia, 2011).

As Kantharia mentioned SL is focused on two main areas: Servanthood and Leadership. Regarding the servanthood aspects, the leader is oriented to help followers grow within the organization. Unlike the toxic leader, SL is driven by humanity and empathy and is mainly concerned with the willingness to help and serve others to excel at their best. As for the leadership part, the leader builds the organization by effectively using people as resources; the emphasis here is on leadership skills, such as vision-casting and team-building (Kantharia, 2011).

To sum up, the whole models presented above place a strong impact on the positive influence that the servant leader has on followers through his commitment to others's growth, ability to communicate effectively by listening to the followers' needs and placing the interests of followers in the first place. Thus the servant leader is the one who pays careful consideration to each staff member, allows staff to express ideas and most of all is ready to serve them with his strong vision and empathy.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research aimed to study the perceptions of Bulgarian employees of servant leadership. For these purposes, a quantitative approach has been chosen to meet the researcher's goal. The target population was Bulgarian employees who had work experience. The reason for this is that those with working experience are exposed to the leadership process and are more likely to provide answers that are valuable to this research. The data collection process began in February and it lasted 9 weeks, and 200 links were sent to participants, who work both in international companies and Bulgarian companies from various businesses such as call center sectors, education sector, IT sectors, health care sectors, and others. As a result, from 200 links sent only 94 were retrieved.

The sampling technique that was employed in this research was purposeful sampling as the authors tried to gather data from participants who were Bulgarian and had work experience rather than a random Bulgarian. Also, the snowballing sampling technique was used because the authors asked the participants to share the link that they sent to other colleagues (Kangoma, 2023).

This research aimed to provide an understanding of the perception of Bulgarian employees when it comes to servant leadership behavior. To help with this research the authors have formulated two research questions:

1. Are all the attributes of servant leadership perceived by Bulgarian employees positively?
2. Does the higher power distance culture in Bulgaria influence the perception of employees when it comes to the attribute of empowerment of servant leadership?

The respondents have to answer 13 questions about servant leadership attributes that link to the characteristics of servant leadership such as humility, empowerment, empathy, community development, moral integrity, and egalitarianism.

The participants were given two questions to answer related to the empowerment attribute of servant leadership. The first question that links to this attribute asked:

Allowing employees to make decisions on the job and providing guidance without being angry if employees make mistakes. It became clear that 40 % of the participants strongly agree that this is an important attribute for leaders to have, 29 % agree, 4 % are neutral, 3% disagree and 2 % disagree that this is important for leaders to possess it.

Then respondents were invited to answer if encouraging employees to give new ideas would help the success of the group. It became clear from the replies that 60% of the respondents strongly agree that this is an important attribute to have, 29 % agree, 7 are neutral, 3 % disagree and 1 % strongly disagree. The mean score for this question is 1.57 which shows a positive result.

Regarding egalitarianism, the respondents have to answer about how they feel about treating employees with respect and equality regardless of the position that the employees have in the organization. Based on the replies, 48 % of the participants say that they strongly agree that this is important for leaders to have, 29 % agree, 6 % are neutral, 4 % disagree and 0 % strongly disagree.

Regarding the attribute of humility, the respondents have to answer if displaying humility by not bragging about achievements and the awards that the leader has achieved in front of employees is an important aspect. The results show that 33 % of the participants strongly agree that this is an important attribute, 39 % agree, 14 % are neutral whereas only 10 % disagree and 2% strongly disagree.

The results of the study show that respondents view this attribute of servant leadership as being an important attribute for leadership success. The Bulgarian respondents with a non-managerial position when asked the question: Allowing employees to decide on the job and guide without being angry if employees make mistakes, these participants strongly supported this attribute). It seems logical as supported by the view of [Alexandrova \(2015\)](#) that employees who come from a culture that is high in power view the opportunity to take responsibility negatively and this study showed that employees see this attribute of servant leadership positively.

The authors suggest that one reason for this finding is the wording of the question, which asks respondents to evaluate whether they agree or disagree that this attribute allows employees to make decisions and provide guidance without fear of anger if they make mistakes. The question focuses on the leader's willingness to grant employees autonomy rather than on employees actively taking the initiative. The authors argue that in high power distance cultures, employees typically do not challenge authority and tend to follow instructions without question. As a result, they may be less inclined to take ownership, as leadership and decision-making are generally perceived as the responsibility of those in authority ([Hofstede, 2001](#)).

Regarding community development, the respondents were asked if engagement in activities that promote the well-being of the planet and the community is important and it became obvious that 40 % of the participants strongly agree, 34 % agree, 19 % are neutral, 3% disagree, and 3 % strongly disagree.

Egalitarianism as an attribute of servant leadership was perceived positively by the Bulgarian participants, this can be seen by the mean score of the two questions that linked to this attribute being 1.54 and 1.82. This is an interesting finding in cultures with a high dimension of power distance, leaders are perceived as superior, inaccessible and expected to be authoritarian (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), and the employees accept this since they will not challenge the leaders. The study shows the opposite result as the Bulgarian participants value leaders who are respectful of their employees regardless of their position in the organization, and they value leaders who are accessible to their employees (Kangoma, 2023).

Regarding the attribute of moral integrity, the current study shows that leaders must have high ethical values to lead effectively, and it shows that this attribute of servant leadership is viewed as an important attribute by Bulgarian employees. In addition, this study also contributes and supports the study that was conducted by Dorfman et al. (2004) who found that integrity was an important component of leadership that was perceived globally as being important for leadership success as cited by Kangoma (2023).

Regarding the attribute of employee development, the current study focuses on the importance of employees and their development not only for the growth of the organization but also for employee satisfaction and commitment to the organization. This study shows how important it is for leaders to focus on developing their followers and providing the resources that are needed for them to reach their potential. The study suggests that the Bulgarian participants view the attribute of servant leadership of development employees as an important attribute for effective leadership (Kangoma, 2023).

- The community development attribute of servant leadership was also positively perceived by respondents in the survey. What is more, this statement is supported by the literature review saying that societies with a collectivist culture prefer to have leaders who create group harmony within the organization (Kangoma, 2023).
- Empathy as a typical characteristic of servant leadership has been confirmed as an important attribute for leaders to have to lead effectively. This result is supported by the theory that leaders should be emotionally intelligent when working with people (Kangoma, 2023).
- Humility is also perceived as an important attribute for leaders to have to lead effectively, this highlights the importance of leaders having the humility to lead effectively in Bulgaria, which is also important for leaders who want to build a learning culture within the organization (Pavlov, 2020).
- The attribute of servant leadership of moral integrity was also rated by employees as being an important attribute for leaders to have in order to lead effectively. This result added to the view of today where leaders are being asked to be more ethical and this study also is supported by the literature that says moral integrity is an attribute that is rated universally as being important for effective leadership (Kangoma, 2023).

4. CONCLUSION

Servant leader is the new leader nowadays, oriented to the needs of peers, and ready to support their development and career planning. It became clear from the results of the study, that servant leader is needed and well-perceived today due to their moral and ethical integrity, combined with a strong desire to help and show empathy to their followers.

Our contribution is adding more aspects of servant leadership. The study conducted is very useful for managers in all spheres and can help them to increase the loyalty and well-being of the staff

they manage. Our contribution is to the study of servant leadership especially when it comes to exploring the perception of this leadership style in Bulgaria. The positive in our case is the lack of such study at the moment. What is more, our study can provide insight to managers in international and local companies in Bulgaria to adopt the servant leadership style as one of the most effective by creating a positive working climate in the workplace. This study shows how Bulgarian employees view the characteristics of servant leadership, which can be useful for leaders who want to practice servant leadership to know what are the characteristics valued by employees in Bulgaria so that they can adapt their servant leadership behavior to the cultural context.

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