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Published in:
BAM 2020 Conference Proceedings

Published: 03/09/2020

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal

Citation for published version (APA):
McQuade, K., Harrison, C., & Tarbert, H. (2020). Servant leadership: the skills of those who serve. In *BAM 2020 Conference Proceedings* British Academy of Management.

Servant Leadership: The Skills of Those Who Serve

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Track: Leadership and Leadership Development Track

Word Count: 2000

Introduction

Although it was only conceptualised in the 1970s by Robert Greenleaf, servant leadership is a concept which has been established within historical monarchs and ancient religious figures (Nair, 1994; Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002). It is a topic which has generated continuous interest throughout the 21st century, particularly as leaders look towards more follower-centric and moral approaches to leadership (Russell, 2016; Sendjaya and Sendjaya, 2002). However, despite its increasing popularity, it manages to remain a relatively obscure area of study, often overlooked in favour of the more established areas of leadership research which tend to dominate the field (Boyum, 2006). Yet, servant leadership has proven to promote success within organisations, thus highlighting its importance as an area of study (Harrison, 2018). Furthermore, it remains a phenomenon which fascinates leaders, researchers and academics with its promises and paradoxes (Harrison, 2018).

This developmental paper will therefore provide a brief overview of the research which has been carried out to date, regarding this subject and highlight the direction which the research will continue. It will begin by providing an overview of the concept of servant leadership, it will then examine the overall aim and objectives of the research, the methodology undertaken, the findings of the systematic literature review (SLR), an overview of the preliminary findings of the research and conclude with where the research will progress next.

Aims and Objectives:

The aim and objectives were developed as a result of a systematic literature review which highlighted the current gaps within the field. There have been only two SLRs conducted thus far regarding servant leadership (Eva et al., 2018; Parris and Peachey, 2013). Yet neither of the reviews examine the skills of servant leadership which is an important part of the field.

Research Aim:

The aim of this research is to examine the lived experiences of Servant Leaders within SMEs and to determine the skills that they require for success.

Research Objectives:

- To identify the skills necessary for servant leadership within SMEs

- To develop a conceptual framework of the servant leadership skills necessary within SMEs which contributes to the existing theory
- To examine the lived experiences of servant leaders

Systematic Literature Review

A systematic literature review (SLR) allows for transparency and rigour through a scientific process (Tranfield et al., 2003). Through formulating relevant research questions and analysing the relevant information, it is able to identify further areas of study (Eden et al., 2011). As previously mentioned, the research conducted a systematic literature review, examining the field of servant leadership, in order to determine where further research should be conducted. A review protocol was developed, informed by both a narrative literature review and a scoping study.

As discussed, the SLR was guided by review questions which again were informed by the existing servant leadership literature (Harrison et al., 2016). The review questions were as follows:

- What are the themes present within the servant leadership literature?
- What are the skills of servant leaders?
- Where are the gaps in the research of servant leadership?

The SLR found that the majority of the research concerning servant leadership has been conducted quantitatively. In addition, the most commonly used method of

gathering data concerning servant leadership was found to be surveys. However, there have been concerns within academia that the research concerning servant leadership is lacking due to poor research design and measurement (Eva et al., 2019). In particular, there exist at present two SLRs concerning servant leadership This will therefore be addressed within the primary data gathering which will be carried out by this research. The SLR also found that the following themes were most prominent within the servant leadership literature; values, literature reviews, behaviour, theoretical, performance and characteristics. The systematic literature review was also used in order to inform the primary research.

The implications for theory from this research are substantial. It has the potential to develop a new area of servant leadership in the form of skills which has not yet been explored, which was highlighted by the SLR. Whilst it is the case that limited research does exist regarding skills within servant leadership, with Bottom and Lenz determining that the skills of communication, listening, conflict resolution, problem solving and decision making are necessary for servant leadership (Bottum and Lenz, 1998). However, whilst Bottum and Lenz outline the skills they believe necessary for servant leadership, their research is not supported empirically. Additionally, the skill set required for servant leaders as a whole is not identified within this research, nor within any other research identified by the SLR. This research, when completed, will be able to provide an up to date, relevant overview of the skills necessary for servant leadership, which is validated by empirical evidence.

Furthermore, the SLR has determined that as of yet there is no definition of servant leadership which can be considered universal or concise. Even one of the leading proponents of servant leadership, Greenleaf fails to provide an explicit definition of servant leadership (Andersen, 2009; Laub, 1999). At present, researchers use a plethora of different definitions and constructs to measure servant leadership (Harrison, 2018). This will be addressed by this research when it provides an overarching and encompassing definition of servant leadership.

In addition, as previously mentioned, this research will develop a conceptual framework from those findings, which at present is lacking within the literature as found by the SLR. This may in turn inspire further research and development of

theory. Furthermore, the framework can be used as a training aid for employees in the workplace, a learning tool by practitioners of servant leadership as well as potential future leaders.

Overall, the SLR enabled this research to identify further areas of research which are necessary within the field of servant leadership. Additionally, it informed the methodology to be undertaken by this research, which will now be discussed.

Methodology:

This research is concerned with producing new knowledge as opposed to, rather reaffirming or finding a new method of presenting existing knowledge (Rozakis, 2007). Essentially, the main purpose of research is the generation of knowledge, which informed the methodological approaches adopted when conducting the research.

When discussing a methodology, it is important to determine the research approach which it will undertake. This research has chosen to take an inductive approach to the research. This was decided based upon the fact that this research has not conducted any prior observation, nor is it based upon an existing hypothesis (Neuman, 2014). Furthermore, it is not informed by any prior conceptions due to the lack of existing research examining the skills of servant leadership, yet it will use the data gathered to generate new knowledge (Thomas, 2006). This also ensures that the framework can be developed free of any bias or influence of previous works.

As with regards to the paradigm this research will adopt, it has been decided that interpretivist is the most suitable. This is because it aims to address its aims and objectives by interpreting the data gathered from participants and the differences between them (Saunders, 2012). Furthermore, this research will be purely qualitative, meaning an interpretivist paradigm is the most suitable to adopt (Eliaeson, 2002).

In addition to the paradigm, this research will adopt an interpretivist philosophy for the research. This was decided upon as the research is concerned with human

interaction (Hudson and Ozanne, 1998). This research furthermore has no preconceived notions making an interpretivist philosophy most suitable (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

Furthermore, this research will be adopting qualitative approach as it is concerned with human experiences, and this research aims to examine the lived experiences of servant leaders (Given, 2008). It will then proceed to use a thematic analysis in order to analyse the findings of the qualitative research. This is also logical as this research is addressing the human element of the data rather than statistics or numbers, making a qualitative approach the most logical. It will analyse the findings of the research via the means of a thematic analysis.

The research will be conducted via the means of semi structured interviews with both employees and leaders in SMEs across Scotland. The questions will be based on the work of Katz (1955) research into leadership skills and additionally on the servant leadership literature in order to address the aim and objectives. The data collection process will continue until data saturation is completed. This method has been chosen due to the social constructionist nature of this research and in order to allow participants to divulge more detailed information regarding servant leadership (Silverman, 2000). The interview questions will be informed by the results of the systematic literature review which will now be discussed.

Preliminary analysis of the field research:

So far, the interview process has been completed with 34 interviews conducted across a variety of SMEs within Scotland, consisting of both leaders and employees within organisation. At present, preliminary analysis of the research has detected the following themes regarding the skills of servant leaders; vision, problem solving and communication.

Vision has been found to be a skill of servant leaders which has been identified by both employees and leaders. For example, leader A stated: "I certainly have a vision." This was then echoed by Leader E who stated, "I would say that I have a

vision, I know where I want the team to be". Leader C also said, "I have a vision for this business." Thus far, employees also seem to be in agreement that leaders in their company have vision. For example, Employee B stated, "There's a definite vision." Employee D has explained, of their leader "There's certainly a vision." It is therefore the case that so far, we can determine from these quotes that both employees and leaders agree that servant leaders need to have a vision within an organisation.

With regards to problem solving this again seems to be echoed by both leaders and employees. Leader F stated: "I enjoy problems, I call them challenges." Leader E also agreed that "What we do is solve problems." This is further agreed with by Leader F who states that "Problem solving, I'm a great believer in." These sentiments have also been paralleled thus far by at least three employees, with employee K describing their leader as "a problem solver, I've seen evidence of that." Employee J also believes that their leaders "are problem solvers," which is echoed by employee A, whom when discussing their leaders work state "it's like it's problem solving."

Furthermore, employees and leaders both demonstrate that they believe communication to be a key skill of servant leaders. However, so far, the main disparity seems to lie in the leaders and the employee's beliefs regarding how they relate to each other. Whilst leaders tend to believe that they relate well to their employees, this is not echoed thoroughly by their employees. For example, employee E has stated "Were very different' whereas the corresponding leader, leader E stated, "I've done the jobs that they've done before so I can relate." Furthermore, contrary to the literature, the interviews have highlighted that not all servant leaders find it necessary to be involved in the local community. These findings will be investigated further via a thematic analysis and can be examined more thoroughly as well as potentially identifying new themes and concepts.

Further development:

Whilst the preliminary findings have been discussed, by the time of the BAM conference the interviews will have been coded and additionally subjected to a more

in-depth thematic analysis. The findings will then be collated and analysed in order to address the original aim and objectives of the research. This will enable an understanding of the lived experience of servant leaders. Additionally, this will allow for the construction of a framework highlighting the skills which are necessary for servant leadership. Furthermore, it will allow for a definition of servant leadership to be developed, informed by both primary and secondary research. Overall, upon completion the research will present a balanced and logical overview of servant leadership which will be discussed at this research's presentation at the BAM conference. Furthermore, the literature review will also be discussed in detail at the BAM conference.

Conclusion:

This paper has highlighted where the research is at present and where it aims to progress within the future. As previously mentioned, servant leadership is presently underrepresented in the field of leadership research (Parris and Peachey, 2013). This research will add qualitative empirical research to an area of study which is presently lacking in this type of research (Page and Wong, 2000). Furthermore, it will present an alternative to the heroic forms of leadership presently practised, and can be used by those wishing to adopt a more follower-focused work environment (Page and Wong, 2000).This research will be beneficial to those with an interest in leadership and can be used within academia, research and industry.

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