

## Servant Leadership and Servant Leaders' Attributes

**Javid Nafari**

M.B.A. Amirkabir University of Technology

Email: j.nafari@aut.ac.ir

### **Abstract**

The concept and theory of Servant leadership is becoming more popular and important among other leadership styles in the current era of leadership and management. Although it is an alluring and interesting concept it is not yet clearly defined and it is not completely elaborated and supported by empirical research. In this article servant leadership's literature, its attributes and the differences between servant leadership and transformational leadership will be discussed. And in the end based on the many attributes suggested by many studies and researchers, we will develop a framework for categorizing the functional and accompanying attributes of servant leaders. After categorizing the attributes two models will be suggested for researchers to work on and for practitioners to apply in their organizations.

**Keywords:** Organizational Behavior – Servant Leadership Model – Servant Leader's Attributes - Transformational Leadership

## 1. Literature review

Nowadays, in many organizations, the leadership approaches that value the well-fare and development of followers are greatly important. The term servant leadership was created by Robert Greenleaf (1998) and he says it happens “with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. The best test is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants?”

“Going beyond one’s self-interest” is a core characteristic of servant leadership in Robert Greenleaf’s opinion. Therefore, if we want to have servant leadership in an organization the leader must emphasize on creating opportunities that facilitate the growth and development of followers. And this happens when the leader serves followers and the organization. The follower’s development might happen through training, mentoring or reinforcement that encourages them to be active in self-development or by providing support and concern as well as an ethical and transparent working environment. This person-oriented attitude creates safe and strong relationships in an organization.

The contrast between Transformational or Transactional Leadership and Servant Leadership is that the concerns of the leader in Servant Leadership, which were mentioned before, are different to those of Transactional and Transformational Leadership which are more focused on the development and well-being of the organization or the leader rather than the followers. The Servant leader’s person-oriented attitude makes him a steward for the accomplishment of the interests of the organizations and follower.

Servant Leadership may come from a deep down need to serve in the leader, which the power and the organizational power of the leader make it possible to meet this need. The theory of Servant Leadership doesn’t suggest that the power is given to followers or that the servant leader does whatever the followers want, but it focuses on the duty of the leader to encourage followers’ autonomy and responsibility. Servant leadership has changed the perspective of followers in the management theory, from opportunistic and self-serving to trustworthy, self-actualizing and pro-organization. Graham (1991) concludes that high humility and empathy and low need for power can be the antecedents of Servant Leadership.

Empirical studies have supported and shown the uniqueness of servant leadership compared to other kinds of leadership. For instance, Parolini et al. (2009) showed that five items made the difference between servant and transformational leadership; these items covered the subjects of service, focus on employees and influencing followers in a way that gives them more freedom. Other studies show that Servant leadership behavior predicts OCB through higher commitment of followers and higher follower self-efficacy. Others found that servant leadership behaviors have a positive connection to followers’ organizational commitment, job satisfaction, creative behaviors, empowerment and the satisfaction of their psychological needs. Also Hu and Liden (2011) showed that having servant leadership in Chinese teams increased the effects of process and goal clarity on the outcomes. In Servant leadership the leader’s personal commitment to followers may increase the support of organizational goals amongst followers and subsequently lead to a higher performance. On the other hand, although servant leadership is celebrated by and favorable among followers, it may not be the perfect solution for short-term efficiency and profit-maximization. Also other researches have suggested that Servant Leadership may be a long-term solution and may make the company more successful in the long-term.

## 2. Transformational VS. Servant Leadership

A challenging paradox to organizations has appeared by the arrival of the theory of Servant leadership. For instance, the traditional approaches to management preferred to have the power in the hands of a few people and expected compliance and obedience from employees and subordinates. So we can say that Transformational leadership behaviors are focused on inspiring and motivating followers to

achieve organizational goals that mostly come from the leader's own goals and ambitions. It should be noted that while Transformational leadership may be persuasive, it is not manipulative or unethical, just like Servant leadership. But the difference between these two is that in Transformational leadership the focus is on the well-being of the organization but in Servant leadership the focus is on the well-being of followers.

It appears that Transformational leaders are seen as more effective. At the same time, Servant leaders who show SL are seen as being better at answering the needs of followers. These perceptions of leadership effectiveness and need satisfaction can be used to predict organizational commitment.

### 3. Servant Leader's Attributes

Van Dierendonck (2011) has noted that there is still little consensus about a clear definition of servant leadership or its mechanisms and the attributes of servant leaders. For instance, here you can see that many different studies of the mechanisms and attributes of Servant Leadership includes factors such as humility, relational power, persuasive mapping, altruistic calling, service orientation, increased follower autonomy, emotional healing, wisdom, follower development, moral love, altruism, vision, trust, service, humility, and follower empowerment, vision, influence, trust, service, and credibility, voluntary subordination, authentic self (humility), covenantal relationship (service to followers), responsible morality, transcendental spirituality, and transforming influence, emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, and behaving ethically.

In order to discuss and find out the attributes of Servant Leadership, first we should be able to observe distinct characteristics and behaviors in such leaders. But the literature regarding this matter is vague, inconsistent and not clear, despite the fact that the literature around this subject is a combination of different literature styles ranging from books to journals, popular press to research. Fortunately, there is just enough consistency in the literature to make it possible for us to extract the characteristics or attributes of such leaders.

Studies show that leaders who were high in agreeableness and low in extraversion were more likely to be seen as servant leaders by their followers. This may be because of the servant leader's underlying motivations and values that make his behavior.

Larry Spears (1998), CEO of the Greenleaf Center, concluded that Robert Greenleaf's writings incorporated ten major attributes of servant leadership. These included:

- Listening;
- Empathy;
- Healing;
- Awareness;
- Persuasion;
- Conceptualization;
- Foresight;
- Stewardship;
- Commitment to the growth of people; and
- Building community.

Although Spears (1998) presented and incorporated these attributes from Greenleaf's writings, he mentioned that, "these ten characteristics of servant leadership are by no means exhaustive". The researchers after Spears have identified other attributes from Greenleaf's writings and now the literature on this subject identifies 20 distinguishable attributes. These 20 attributes include all of Greenleaf's mentioned characteristics and attributes such as listening, persuasion, and stewardship are

specifically listed among the 20, while the rest are incorporated under broader categories. For example, conceptualization and foresight fall under the "vision" category.

Here we see nine of these attributes identified as functional attributes. They have been identified as functional because of their repetitive appearance in the literature. In the list below all the nine functional attributes along with references to the primary writers can be seen.

- **Vision** (Covey, 1996; De Pree, 1997; Fairholm, 1998; Ford, 1991; Greenleaf, 1977; Malphurs, 1996; Melrose, 1995; Miller, 1995; Neuschel, 1998).
- **Honesty** (Covey, 1996; Fairholm, 1998; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Nair, 1994; Pollard, 1996; Rinehart, 1998; Winston, 1999).
- **Integrity** (Covey, 1996; Fairholm, 1998; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Nair, 1994; Pollard, 1996; Rinehart, 1998; Winston, 1999).
- **Trust** (Covey, 1990; De Pree, 1997; Fairholm, 1998; Ford, 1991; Greenleaf, 1977; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Melrose, 1995; Miller, 1995; Neuschel, 1998).
- **Service** (Covey, 1990; De Pree 1997; Fairholm, 1997; Ford, 1991; Greenleaf, 1977; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Nair, 1994; Neuschel, 1998; Pollard, 1996; Rinehart, 1998).
- **Modeling** (Covey, 1990; Briner and Pritchard, 1998; De Pree, 1992; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Malphurs, 1996; Miller, 1995; Pollard, 1996).
- **Pioneering** (Covey, 1996; Greenleaf, 1980; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Melrose, 1997; Miller, 1995; Nair, 1994; Neuschel, 1998).
- **Appreciation** of others (Autry, 2001; Covey, 1990; Greenleaf, 1977; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Pollard, 1996; Winston, 1999).
- **Empowerment** (Covey, 1990; De Pree 1989; Fairholm, 1998; Ford, 1991; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Melrose, 1997; Miller, 1995; Pollard, 1996; Rinehart, 1998).

It can be said that functional attributes are effective characteristics, operative qualities and specific features of servant leaders observed in the workplace. Each one of these functional attributes is distinct and unique, but at the same time they are all interrelated and even in some cases, the attributes influence one another.

In addition to the functional attributes, there are attributes named accompanying attributes of servant leadership in the literature. These include:

- **Communication** (Melrose, 1995; Neuschel, 1998; Nix, 1997).
- **Credibility** (Kouzes and Posner, 1993; McKenna, 1989; Neuschel, 1998).
- **Competence** (De Pree 1997; Fairholm, 1998; Greenleaf, 1977).
- **Stewardship** (De Pree 1997; Fairholm, 1998; Gaston, 1987; Nix, 1997; Spears, 1998).
- **Visibility** (Cedar, 1987; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Melrose, 1995).
- **Influence** (Covey, 1990; Greenleaf, 1977; Kouzes and Posner, 1995; Malphurs, 1996).
- **Persuasion** (Covey, 1990; De Pree, 1997; Greenleaf, 1980).
- **Listening** (Greenleaf, 1977; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Neuschel, 1998; Roberts, 1987).
- **Encouragement** (Nix, 1997; Pollard, 1996; Spears, 1998).
- **Teaching** (Fairholm, 1998; Ford, 1991; Neuschel, 1998; Pollard, 1996; Rinehart, 1998).
- **Delegation** (Covey, 1990; Fairholm, 1997; Melrose, 1997; Neuschel, 1998; Pollard, 1996).

The accompanying attributes supplement the functional attributes, they are not secondary, rather complementary. Because servant leadership literature has few empirical researches, the classifications mentioned above are up for debate. Also researches in the future may find additional attributes, but for now these structures provide the opportunity for an analytical study. In this review the functional attributes are analyzed.

### 3.1. Vision

In the leadership perspective, vision is "an ideal and unique image of the future". Greenleaf (1977, pp. 21-2) used the terms foresight and conceptualizing to describe vision. He also mentioned that the servant leader "needs to have a sense for the unknowable and be able to foresee the unforeseeable".

Therefore, a major and central role of the servant leader is having a strategic vision for the organization.

One of the ways that leadership and management are different is that leaders establish a vision for the future. This established vision must be compelling, inspiring, and empowering. The vision brings the followers together and inspires them. Also developing a vision makes organizational change and transformation easier. A good vision is not egocentric; rather it consists of a value system that encourages learning and adaptation.

### **3.2. Communication**

Leaders must articulate and communicate their vision. Researchers suggest that effective leadership depends on sufficient and good communication skills. The effective leader must articulate the mission of the organization in an inspiring, motivational and convincing way.

The most important commitment a leader makes in relation to a vision is "the commitment to model the vision through one's own behavior in a visible and consistent manner" (Snyder et al., 1994, p. 100). The leader demonstrates his values through behavior and by that gives life to the vision. This process is called "personifying the vision".

### **3.3. Honesty and integrity**

The leader's character is an important factor in followers accepting him as a leader. The character attribute which is the most important in having credibility among followers is honesty. Honesty is the most admired quality of leaders, followed by their visionary nature, the ability to inspire and their competence.

Honesty and integrity are almost the same, but honesty is more about truthfulness, whereas integrity is about following an overall moral code. Northouse (1997) says that integrity incorporates honesty and trustworthiness. Integrity is also closely related to ethics.

Servant leadership is a promising way of leadership that can be a way for improving the ethical cultures of organizations. Clawson (1999, pp. 46-9) suggested that the moral foundation of effective leadership is integrity and integrity itself results from four essential values:

- Truth-telling;
- Promise-keeping;
- Fairness; and
- Respect for the individual.

In the end, what is needed is leaders with integrity who can be honest in challenging and potentially self-damaging situations.

### **3.4. Credibility**

Honesty and integrity facilitate interpersonal credibility. Credibility is "the quality, capability, or power to elicit belief". Credibility is the essential ingredient in a good leadership. Credibility is how leaders earn the trust and confidence of their followers. Credible leaders have the values, traits, and competencies to have their followers' commitment and compliance.

Hackman and Johnson (1996) identified competence, trustworthiness (character) and dynamism as the most significant elements of credibility. In addition, "demonstrating relevant expertise and keeping informed about technical matters and relevant developments" enhances leadership credibility (Yukl, 1998, p. 199).

### **3.3. Trust**

Establishing trust is one of the most essential parts of a good leadership, especially servant leadership. It is one of the most important factors that influence leader-member relations, leader effectiveness, and productivity. If the leader has a reputation for being trustworthy, it influences the follower's reliance and confidence in any decision-making situation. Trust is also important in interpersonal communications.

Leaders must show concern for followers and have integrity, to build trust. Honesty and integrity are also essential to building interpersonal and organizational trust.

### **3.6. Competence**

Competence means to be well qualified or to have a specific range of knowledge and ability. Today's leaders must have new skills, knowledge, and abilities that give them competence between followers. Greenleaf (1977, p. 16) said, "one who states the goal [vision] must elicit trust ... leaders do not elicit trust unless one has confidence in their values and competence". Also Maxwell (1998, p. 58) said, "to build trust, a leader must exemplify competence, connection and character".

### **3.7. Service**

Service is the core attribute of servant leadership. In any Leadership, the leader always has to make a choice between service and self-interest and according to (Block, 1993) the choice for service is rarely made. The leader who chooses a service role provides resources for followers to help them achieve their goals. Serving followers is done by making available to them information, time, attention, material and other resources and the higher corporate purposes that give meaning to the work. Also these leaders model service through their own actions.

### **3.8. Stewardship**

Stewardship is an important part of service. Leaders and their followers are generally stewards or agents of the organization. Block (1993) suggested a paradigm shift in leadership towards stewardship based on service. Stewardship of this type involves honesty and accountability; it is not merely entitlement (Block, 1993; De Pree, 1997).

### **3.9. Modeling**

Being a visible and personal example is an important part in Servant leadership. It is believed that modeling is the foundation for leader influence. "Leaders model the way through personal example and dedicated execution" (Kouzes and Posner, 1995, p. 13). Servant leaders attract followers into commitment, into dedication, into discipline, and into excellence by modeling the necessary behaviors and attitudes.

Modeling is an effective way to emphasize and establish a leader's organizational vision. Leaders can also establish attributes in their organizational cultures by modeling. The behaviors of senior leaders also establish the ethical tone in their organizations which is an important part of Servant leadership. These leaders instill values through actions as much as or more than through words.

### **3.10. Visibility**

Visibility is essential if the servant leader wants to establish the desired behaviors through modeling. Visibility can be defined as the leader's public presence, behavior, and interactions with followers. "The effective servant leader is highly visible in his leading and caring and comforting" (Cedar, 1987, p. 109). One of the ways for leaders to influence followers is by their visible example and also the followers must see leaders "do what they say they will do".

Servant leaders gain power by visibly interacting with followers. Referent power, comes from strong interpersonal relations and it is one of the most suitable and appropriate types of power for servant leaders to have. Yukl (1998, p. 199) says that the "obvious way to exercise referent power is through role modeling". For example, Melrose (1995, p. 150), CEO of the Toro Corporation, mentions that he always that he tries to be a visible role model of servant leadership by doing "some things in my daily work that shows what I'm asking others to do".

### **3.11. Pioneering**

Leaders must be initiators, they must be pioneers who are risk takers, create new ways and do things based on their strong values and beliefs. Servant leaders must be pioneers. They must be catalysts for

change and good decision makers. Servant leaders take risks, show bravery and face challenges. However, pioneering may be dangerous and potentially damaging since it involves change and as a result it may involve conflict.

In addition, servant leaders must develop the influence to persuade people to follow them in new directions.

### 3.12. Influence

One of the primary parts of an effective leadership is influence. As we know an ongoing relationship exists in which influence produces power and power produces influence.

Yukl and Tracey (1992) did a field study and found that rational persuasion, inspirational appeal, and consultation the most effective influence tactics. These types of non-manipulative influence tactics are best suited for pioneering servant leaders. Such servant leaders are influential, although they gain their influence through different ways to the ways suggested in traditional models. This extraction from Greenleaf's writings is the best way to describe the importance of influence and its correlation with servant leadership. "A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader."

### 3.13. Persuasion

Being persuasive and using persuasive communication are important parts of influence in leadership. Spears (1995, 1998) identified persuasion among the ten critical attributes of servant leadership and according to Greenleaf (1978, 1980); there are three primary alternatives for leaders to gain power:

- Coercion;
- Manipulation; and
- Persuasion.

By looking at these alternatives, it is obvious that persuasion is the most suitable alternative for servant leaders to gain power.

Greenleaf said that persuasion is:

"...the critical skill of servant leadership. Such a leader is one who ventures and takes the risks of going out ahead to show the way and whom others follow, voluntarily, because they are persuaded that the leader's path is the right one for them, probably better than they could devise for themselves (Greenleaf, 1980, p. 44)."

Servant leaders do not use persuasion to control followers; they use it to develop understanding between him and the followers and also to share wisdom and knowledge. Servant leaders use this kind of power, which is an ethical use of power, in a thoughtful way to strengthen the organization and followers rather than themselves.

### 3.14. Appreciation of others

Visibility was an important part of servant leaders' attributes and we still can see its footsteps here because Servant leaders must visibly care for and care about, appreciate, motivate, value and encourage their followers. In fact Servant leaders love to see their followers succeed. They give others hope and courage by modeling, giving love and encouragement and appreciating them. These actions lead to followers' love for the workplace and building strong relationships. By showing concern for others and making their needs and interests a priority, servant leaders can show empathy and build trust.

Kouzes and Posner (1993) saw a change of focus in management and leadership trends' values from self to others. Also Autry (2001, p. 20) suggested that "leadership is not about controlling people; it's about caring for people and being a useful resource for people".

### 3.13. Listening

Listening helps you show your respect and appreciation of others. Servant leaders ask, listen, and hear when communicating with their followers. And the servant leaders' openness to the followers' input positively affects leader-follower trust.

Some researchers argue that leaders benefit from listening because they learn when they listen and that listening is a critical aspect of delegating and empowering, which all three issues are very important in servant leadership.

### **3.16. Encouragement**

Servant leaders do more than just appreciating their followers, they encourage and motivate them. Commitment to the growth of people is one of the critical characteristics of servant leadership and, encouraging the followers and making them feel important and significant, is a part of this commitment. Also Bennis and Goldsmith (1997) suggest that recognition of followers and encouraging them is one of the five primary values among effective leaders.

### **3.17. Empowerment**

One of the core parts of any excellent leadership, especially servant leadership, is empowerment. By empowering followers to lead servant leaders can multiply their leadership. In order to empower followers, the leader's behavior is important; he must bring the followers together by attracting and energizing them not by pushing them.

By empowering followers the servant leader creates many leaders in all the levels of organization. It can be said that servant leadership changes the traditional organizational hierarchy and flips it upside down. Miller (1995) concludes that although servant leaders establish vision and direction, they should delegate decisions and responsibilities of reaching the goals to followers. He also mentions that this delegation involves trust and accountability.

### **3.18. Teaching**

Servant leaders are those who shape the values and goals of their followers by teaching them the role of leadership, they are the leaders who develop the talents of their followers, so it can be concluded that if they want to empower their followers they must be great teachers. In a learning and ever-growing organization, a part of the leader's role is teaching.

The leader's role consists of learning and then teaching principles and values to followers so that they can lead on their own. Leaders teach followers about trust by modeling an accurate and good example. In addition, coaching and mentoring can be considered as important forms of teaching.

### **3.19. Delegation**

Servant leadership consists of delegation of responsibility and developing participative leadership. It involves giving follower choices and encouraging them to be responsible. Servant leaders empower followers by giving them opportunities to grow and to do their best. Delegation has many advantages, depending on the organization and followers, some of them are mentioned below:

- Higher decision quality;
- Greater follower commitment to and acceptance of decisions;
- Job enrichment; and
- Improved time management for leaders

The degree of delegation done by the leader can show a measurement of his success. True servant leaders prefer to enable and develop followers by giving their power, to a degree, away rather than centralizing and not delegating it.

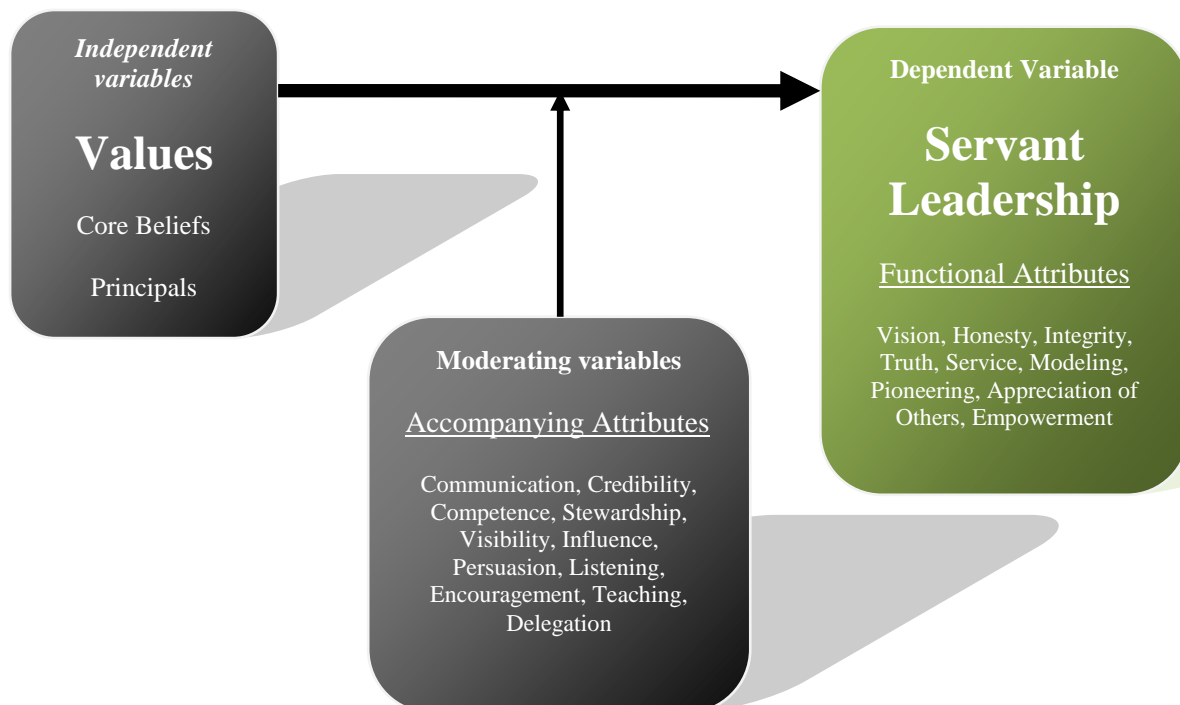
## **4. Suggested Models of Servant Leadership**

In this part the nine attributes revealed by the literature were discussed and now a model for servant leadership will be presented. Although this model is rudimentary and a working model, it provides us a foundation for understanding, applying, researching, and developing the servant leadership concept.

The cognitive characteristics of leaders make up the first part of the servant leadership model. Researchers argue that the attributes of servant leadership come from the core beliefs and values of the leader and they suggest that the leadership image presented by the leader is not superficial but the depiction of the system of values of the leader. In this model values are the independent variables and the dependent variable is manifest servant leadership.

The values of leaders are the functional attributes of servant leaders. Therefore, the functional attributes discussed before are descriptors of the dependent variable. They show us the form and effectiveness of servant leadership.

In addition, accompanying attributes, briefly mentioned before, affect the translation of the leader's values into the functional attributes. So the accompanying attributes are considered moderating variables and they influence the level and intensity of the functional attributes. The model for servant leadership is shown in Figure 1. This model only shows the relationship between leader attributes and servant leadership.



**Figure 1** Servant Leadership Model 1

In addition, servant leadership is a controllable variable that can influence its organization. Therefore, servant leadership can be considered an independent variable that influences on organizational performance. However, variables such as organizational culture and employee attitudes, which can be considered mediating variables, may affect the effectiveness of servant leadership and subsequently affect organizational performance. For example, an organization's communication systems may make it hard to facilitate the servant leadership process. Also, existing organizational values may help or limit servant leadership. There may also be powerful people or groups in the organization that help the process of servant leadership. Consequently, Model 2 is a more detailed and complete model for servant leadership (see Figure 2).

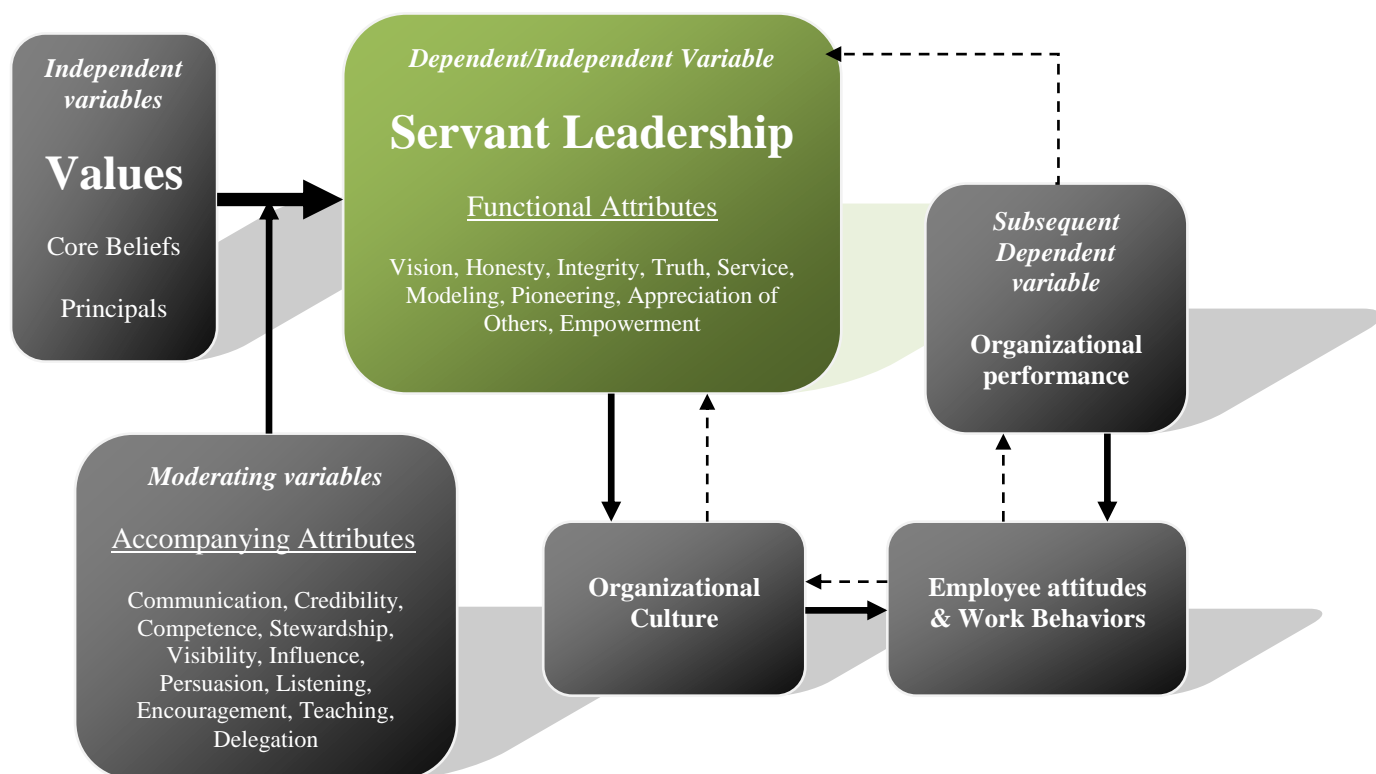


Figure 2 Servant Leadership Model 2

These two models provide us with opportunities to apply and study the Servant leadership theory more than before. For Practitioners these models establish and provide them with key characteristics of servant leadership and help them in the servant leadership process by pointing to leadership behaviors in the servant leadership process.

## 5. Conclusion

Many theorists and researchers think of and consider servant leadership as a valid and an important model for the modern organizational leadership, but the Servant leadership theory is still vague and not supported by enough empirical research. The existing literature provides nine functional and eleven accompanying attributes for servant leadership but these attributes only provide us with a basis for a model, and this foundation should be used for more field research and real world empirical studies. The reason that servant leadership is considered very important is that it can potentially change organizations and societies since it stimulates both personal and organizational metamorphoses. "Becoming servant leaders engages us in personal, internal self-change and changes our outward behavior" (Fairholm, 1997, p. 149). You just need to imagine that by only having individuals transform into servant leaders more people would benefit from it. Servant leadership has the potential to change interpersonal relations and organizational life.

## References

- Bill Flint Jr. Megan Grayce. "Servant leadership: History, a conceptual model, multicultural fit, and the servant leadership solution for continuous improvement" In *Collective Efficacy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on International Leadership*. Published online: 08 Mar 2015; 59-72.
- Bruce Winston Dail Fields, (2015), "Seeking and measuring the essential behaviors of servant leadership", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 36 Iss 4 pp. 413 – 434

- E.M. Hunter et al. "Servant leaders inspire servant followers: Antecedents and outcomes for employees and the organization", *The Leadership Quarterly* 24 (2013) 316–331
- R.C. Liden et al." Servant leadership: Development of a multidimensional measure and multi-level assessment", *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008) 161–177
- D. van Dierendonck et al. "Same difference? Exploring the differential mechanisms linking servant leadership and transformational leadership to follower outcomes", *The Leadership Quarterly* 25 (2014) 544–562
- Robert F. Russell A. Gregory Stone, (2002),"A review of servant leadership attributes: developing a practical model", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 23 Iss 3 pp. 145 – 157