

# Servant Leadership: A Review and Synthesis

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*Servant leadership is positioned as a new field of research for leadership scholars. This review deals with the historical background of servant leadership, its key characteristics, the available measurement tools, and the results of relevant studies that have been conducted so far. An overall conceptual model of servant leadership is presented. It is argued that leaders who combine their motivation to lead with a need to serve display servant leadership. Personal characteristics and culture are positioned alongside the motivational dimension. Servant leadership is demonstrated by empowering and developing people; by expressing humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship; and by providing direction. A high-quality dyadic relationship, trust, and fairness are expected to be the most important mediating processes to encourage self-actualization, positive job attitudes, performance, and a stronger organizational focus on sustainability and corporate social responsibility.*

**Keywords:** *servant leadership; review; positive organizational behavior*

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Times are changing and so are our views on leadership behavior. In view of the current demand for more ethical, people-centered management, leadership inspired by the ideas from servant leadership theory may very well be what organizations need now. Concern about the society we live in has increasingly become a matter of company policy. It may be that paying attention to all stakeholders is the key to long-term profits. At present, innovation and employee well-being are given high priority and so leadership that is rooted in ethical and caring behavior becomes of great importance. In the relatively new field of positive organizational behavior, leadership recently has been suggested as a key factor for engaged employees and flourishing organizations (Luthans, 2002; Macik-Frey, Quick, &

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Cooper, 2009). During the past few years, leadership studies have clearly moved away from a strong focus on, most notably, transformational leadership toward a stronger emphasis on a shared, relational, and global perspective where especially the interaction between leader and follower are key elements (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). Earlier theorizing by Donaldson and Davis (1991; Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997) emphasized the importance of moving management theory beyond the principles of agency theory—with its assumption of the homo economicus who is individualistic, opportunistic, and self-serving—to governance based on viewing individuals as pro-organizational, self-actualizing, and trustworthy. This is similar to the emphasis in servant leadership theory on the personal growth of followers. Already coined by Greenleaf in 1970, servant leadership may be of particular relevance in this era in that it adds the component of social responsibility to transformational leadership (Graham, 1991); besides, more than any other leadership theory, it explicitly emphasizes the needs of followers (Patterson, 2003). Although influence is generally considered the key element of leadership, servant leadership changes the focus of this influence by emphasizing the ideal of service in the leader–follower relationship. It may, therefore, be a leadership theory with great potential.

However, despite its introduction four decades ago and empirical studies that started more than 10 years ago (Laub, 1999), there is still no consensus about a definition and theoretical framework of servant leadership. Block (2005: 55) probably formulated it best in his 2005 keynote address at the International Servant Leadership conference: “You’ve held on to the spirit of servant-leadership, you’ve kept it vague and undefinable. . . . People can come back every year to figure out what the hell it is.” This brings us back to Greenleaf, who did not leave us an empirically validated definition of servant leadership. Consequently, writers and researchers started coming up with their own definitions and models, to a lesser or greater degree inspired by his work. This has resulted in many interpretations of servant leadership, exemplifying a wide range of behaviors (e.g., Laub, 1999; Russell & Stone, 2002; Spears, 1995). In line with this, there is also confusion about the operationalization of servant leadership. Presently, there are at least seven multidimensional measures and two one-dimensional measures, each with its own twist on servant leadership. Another issue of concern is that most of what has been written about servant leadership (including both academic and nonacademic writings) has been prescriptive, mainly focusing on how it should ideally be; only a few have been descriptive—and inform us about what is happening in practice. As such, there is a compelling need for validated empirical research building on a theoretical model that incorporates the key insights learned from research until now.

The purpose of this article is to resolve the current confusion in the literature on what servant leadership is and to establish an overall theoretical framework highlighting the most important antecedents, underlying processes, and consequences. Unique to this review is that the definition of the key servant leadership characteristics is based on the combined insights of the most influential theoretical models and the operationalizations from seven different research groups. By defining these key leadership characteristics, conceptual transparency is given to the earlier review by Russell and Stone (2002), who defined 20 accompanying and functional attributes. It extends an earlier review by Van Dierendonck, Nuijten, and Heeren (2009) in that more attention is given to the leadership and organizational aspects of servant-leaders.

This article is divided into six sections. First, a brief overview and background of servant leadership is described. In the second section, an operational definition of the key characteristics of servant leadership is given, based on theoretical insights and on what we have learned from the measurement instruments of servant leadership that have been developed over the past 10 years. The third section puts servant leadership in relation to other theories of leadership behavior, including transformational leadership, authentic leadership, ethical leadership, empowering leadership, spiritual leadership, Level 5 leadership, and self-sacrificing leadership. Then, in the fourth section, an overview is given of the main measurement instruments available at this moment and positioned in relation to the key characteristics formulated in the second section. The fifth section describes the antecedents and consequences of servant leadership by drawing directly from empirical evidence that is now available. A theoretical framework guides us through this section and the rest of the article. To help us understand the different elements in the model and their interrelations, I will turn to other theories of organizational behavior to show how they can help us understand specific elements of servant leadership. Regretfully, the majority of servant leadership theories has neglected viewpoints gained from related fields. As such, case studies with a strong qualitative focus have been a popular research design in the field of servant leadership (e.g., Humphreys, 2005; Winston, 2004). Nevertheless, servant leadership theory has much to gain from broadening its perspective, using valid and reliable measures to study the propositions herein. Finally, in the sixth section the insights from our review are discussed and suggestions for future research are made.

## **Defining and Positioning Servant Leadership**

The term *servant leadership* was coined by Robert Greenleaf (1904-1990) in his seminal work "The Servant as Leader," first published in 1970:

The Servant-Leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. . . . The best test, and difficult to administer is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not further be harmed? (1977: 7)

This might be the most famous and well-known quote in the servant leadership field. It is also the closest we have of a definition as written down by Greenleaf himself. Greenleaf placed "going beyond one's self-interest" as a core characteristic of servant leadership. Although mentioned in other leadership theories, it has never been given the central position it has in servant leadership theory. The servant-leader is governed by creating within the organization opportunities to help followers grow (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Compared to other leadership styles where the ultimate goal is the well-being of the organization, a servant-leader is genuinely concerned with serving followers (Greenleaf, 1977), as is also indicated by Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2004). This person-oriented attitude makes way for safe and strong relationships within the organization. Furthermore, as Greenleaf (1998) puts it, servants

that are chosen to be leaders are greatly supported by their employees because they have committed themselves and are reliable. In this way an atmosphere is created that encourages followers to become the very best they can.

It is important to realize that according to Greenleaf the servant-leader is “*primus inter pares*” (i.e., first among equals), who does not use his or her power to get things done but who tries to persuade and convince staff. A servant-leader has the role of a steward who holds the organization in trust (Reinke, 2004). It means that servant-leaders go beyond self-interest. They are motivated by something more important than the need for power, namely, the need to serve (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). This can be related to work by McClelland and Burnham (1976), who earlier indicated that the need for power could also be used in a beneficial way. Greenleaf goes one step further and makes this need to serve the key to good leadership; it leads to a commitment to the growth of individual employees, the survival of the organization, and a responsibility to the community (Reinke, 2004). Power becomes a possibility to serve others and as such may even be considered a prerequisite for servant-leaders. Serving and leading become almost exchangeable. Being a servant allows a person to lead; being a leader implies a person serves.

It should be noted that working from a need to serve does not imply an attitude of servility in the sense that the power lies in the hands of the followers or that leaders would have low-esteem. There is a similarity with the Kantian view on leadership, which emphasizes that it is the responsibility of the leader to increase the autonomy and responsibility of followers, to encourage them to think for themselves (Bowie, 2000b). In view of its focus on values, it is not only in the behavior that servant leadership can be distinguished from other leadership styles but also in the general attitude toward the people in an organization and in the motivation to be a leader. As in personalism (Whetstone, 2002), there is strong commitment to treat each individual respectfully, with an awareness that each person deserves to be loved. Caring for one’s followers should not be purely an instrument of financial success. A servant-leader works toward building a learning organization where each individual can be of unique value. As such, using charisma or emotions to influence followers to act without given them any room for participative thinking or decision making is far from what Greenleaf meant by the emphasis on increasing autonomy, personal growth, and well-being.

## **Key Characteristics of Servant Leadership**

The lack of an accurate definition of servant leadership by Greenleaf has given rise to many interpretations exemplifying a wide range of behaviors. At present, the models developed by Spears (1995), Laub (1999), Russell and Stone (2002), and Patterson (2003) are among the most influential.

Spears (1995) distinguished 10 characteristics that are generally quoted as the essential elements of servant leadership. He is one of the first and probably the most influential person to translate Greenleaf’s ideas into a model that characterizes the servant-leader. As former director of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, he was responsible for a number of edited volumes on servant leadership based directly and indirectly on Greenleaf’s writings (e.g., Greenleaf, 1998; Spears & Lawrence, 2002). With his extensive knowledge of

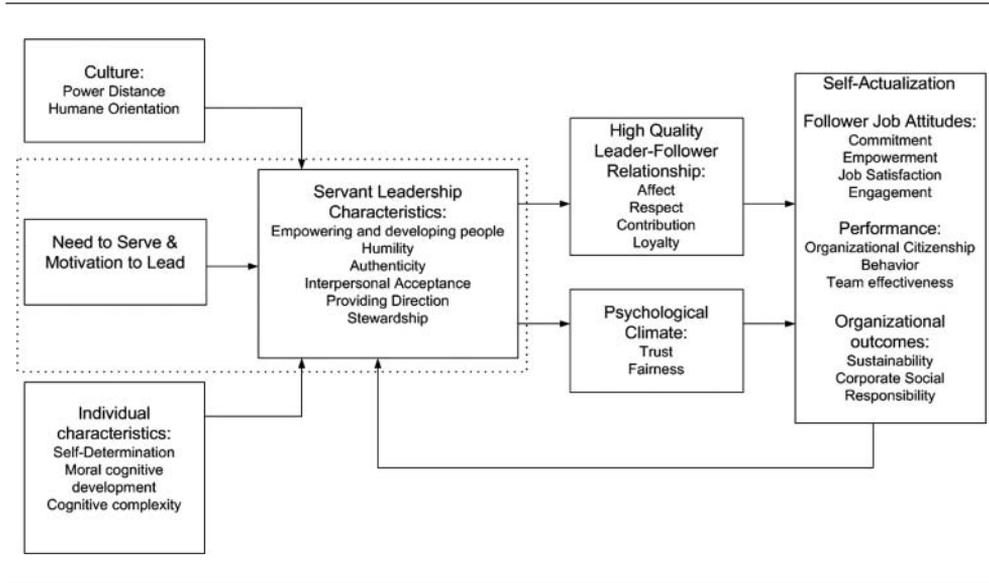
Greenleaf's writings, he distilled 10 characteristics of the servant-leader. These are (1) listening, emphasizing the importance of communication and seeking to identify the will of the people; (2) empathy, understanding others and accepting how and what they are; (3) healing, the ability to help make whole; (4) awareness, being awake; (5) persuasion, seeking to influence others relying on arguments not on positional power; (6) conceptualization, thinking beyond the present-day need and stretching it into a possible future; (7) foresight, foreseeing outcomes of situations and working with intuition, (8) stewardship, holding something in trust and serving the needs of others; (9) commitment to the growth of people, nurturing the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of others; (10) building community, emphasizing that local communities are essential in a persons' life. Regretfully, Spears never took his characteristics to the next step by formulating a model that differentiates between the intra-personal aspects, interpersonal aspects, and outcomes of servant leadership. So, although we intuitively understand these characteristics, they have never been accurately operationalized, making a valid and reliable study based on these characteristics difficult, thereby hindering empirical research.

Various authors have introduced variations to these 10 characteristics. Based on an extensive literature search, Laub (1999) developed six clusters of servant leadership characteristics that were the basis for his measure, described further on. One of the most extensive models is that of Russell and Stone (2002), who distinguished 9 functional characteristics and 11 additional characteristics of servant leadership. The biggest problem with this model is the differentiation between functional attributes and accompanying attributes. It is unclear why certain attributes are allocated to a particular category. Another well-known example is Patterson's (2003) model that encompasses seven dimensions. According to her, servant leadership is about virtues. Virtues describe elements of someone's character that embody excellence. Virtue theory can be traced back as far as the Greek philosopher Aristotle. It is about doing the right thing at the right moment. The strength of this model lies in the conceptualization of the notion of the need to serve; however, it neglects the leader aspect.

Although there are clear overlaps between the 44 (!) characteristics in the different models, there still remains quite a number of different servant-leader attributes. It may seem that the different conceptual models only confuse our understanding. All models have their strengths but also their weaknesses. A second look, however, shows that by differentiating between antecedents, behavior, mediating processes, and outcomes and by combining the conceptual models with the empirical evidence gained from the measures of servant leadership as presented later in this article, one can distinguish six key characteristics of servant-leader behavior that bring order to the conceptual plurality (see Figure 1). However, caution is warranted here, since models and measures may sometimes use different vocabulary for similar concepts, and vice versa. Nevertheless, with these limitations in mind and realizing that probably full justice is not done to all, these six key characteristics give a good overview of servant leadership behavior as experienced by followers. Servant-leaders empower and develop people; they show humility, are authentic, accept people for who they are, provide direction, and are stewards who work for the good of the whole. These will be discussed in the following six paragraphs.

*Empowering and developing people* is a motivational concept focused on enabling people (Conger, 2000). Empowerment aims at fostering a proactive, self-confident attitude among

**Figure 1**  
**A Conceptual Model of Servant Leadership**



followers and gives them a sense of personal power. It shows the one values people and encourages their personal development (Laub, 1999). Empowering leadership behavior includes aspects like encouraging self-directed decision making and information sharing and coaching for innovative performance (Konczak, Stelly, & Trusty, 2000). The servant-leader's belief in the intrinsic value of each individual is the central issue; it is all about recognition, acknowledgement, and the realization of each person's abilities and what the person can still learn (Greenleaf, 1998).

*Humility* is the second key characteristic. It refers to the ability to put one's own accomplishments and talents in a proper perspective (Patterson, 2003). Servant-leaders dare to admit that they can benefit from the expertise of others. They actively seek the contributions of others. Humility shows in the extent to which a leader puts the interest of others first, facilitates their performance, and provides them with essential support. It includes a sense of responsibility (Greenleaf, 1996) for persons in one's charge. Humility is also about modesty; a servant-leader retreats into the background when a task has been successfully accomplished.

*Authenticity* is closely related to expressing the "true self," expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings (Harter, 2002). Authenticity is related to integrity, the adherence to a generally perceived moral code (Russell & Stone, 2002). Authenticity is about being true to oneself, accurately representing—privately and publicly—internal states, intentions, and commitments (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). A servant-leader's authenticity manifests itself in various aspects: doing what is promised, visibility within the organization, honesty (Russell & Stone, 2002), and vulnerability (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). From an

organizational perspective, it can be defined as behaving in such a way that professional roles remain secondary to whom the individual is as a person (Halpin & Croft, 1966).

*Interpersonal acceptance* is the ability to understand and experience the feelings of others and where people are coming from (George, 2000) and the ability to let go of perceived wrongdoings and not carry a grudge into other situations (McCullough, Hoyt, & Rachal, 2000). Interpersonal acceptance includes the perspective-taking element of empathy that focuses on being able to cognitively adopt the psychological perspectives of other people and experience feelings of warmth, compassion, and forgiveness in terms of concern for others even when confronted with offences, arguments, and mistakes. For servant-leaders it is important to create an atmosphere of trust where people feel accepted, are free to make mistakes, and know that they will not be rejected (Ferch, 2005).

*Providing direction* ensures that people know what is expected of them, which is beneficial for both employees and the organization (Laub, 1999). A servant-leader's take on providing direction is to make work dynamic and "tailor made" (based on follower abilities, needs, and input). In this sense, providing direction is about providing the right degree of accountability, which has been suggested as a salient dimension of high-quality dyadic interpersonal relations (Ferris, Liden, Munyon, Summers, Basik, & Buckley, 2009). It can also imply creating new ways or new approaches to old problems, with a strong reliance on values and convictions that govern one's actions (Russell & Stone, 2002).

*Stewardship* is the willingness to take responsibility for the larger institution and to go for service instead of control and self-interest (Block, 1993; Spears, 1995). Leaders should act not only as caretakers but also as role models for others. By setting the right example, leaders can stimulate others to act in the common interest. Stewardship is closely related to social responsibility, loyalty, and team work.

These elements are positioned as six key characteristics of servant leadership behavior. Together, they form an operationalized definition of servant leadership grounded in the different conceptual models as described in the literature. The interrelatedness of these characteristics is an interesting avenue for future research. Spears (1995) formulated his 10 characteristics to be basically all elements of one interconnected concept, that is, servant leadership, and so did Laub (1999) with his six clusters. Patterson (2003) and Winston (2003), however, provided a process model with causal paths between servant leadership characteristics. It is likely that differential effects exist for these characteristics, depending on specific circumstances or follower traits. For now, due to lack of empirical evidence, the six key characteristics are positioned as together representing servant leadership.

## Comparison With Other Leadership Theories

In a recent overview of the current state of leadership research, Avolio et al. (2009) described how the focus of leadership researchers has changed from only the leader to a broader context, including followers, peers, supervisors, work setting, and culture. Leadership theories are more and more acknowledging the complex process that leadership actually is. Especially with its focus on followers and on ethical behavior, servant leadership is part of the emerging theories following the previous academic focus on transformational and charismatic leadership.

There are seven leadership theories that reveal the most overlap with servant leadership, namely, transformational leadership, authentic leadership, ethical leadership, Level 5 leadership, empowering leadership, spiritual leadership, and self-sacrificing leadership. Transformational leadership as first discussed in a more political context by Burns (1978) and later brought to the organizational context by Bass (1985) is defined as a leadership style with explicit attention to the development of followers through individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and supportive behavior. These elements are quite comparable and complementary to definitions of servant leadership. However, there is also the charismatic side of transformational leadership, idealized influence, which raises the question for whom or for what do followers grow? This is exactly where servant leadership and transformational leadership differ. The primary allegiance of transformational leaders is the organization (Graham, 1991). The personal growth of followers is seen within the context of what is good for the organization, because of a desire to perform better. There is an obvious risk of manipulation to achieve organizational goals or to meet the leader's personal goals. Transformational leadership may give rise to the problem of narcissism, whereby a narrow focus on short-term maximal profit may lead ultimately to long-term disastrous consequences (Giampetro-Meyer, Brown, Browne, & Kubasek, 1998).

Given the ideal of service in servant leadership, the largest difference between these two leadership theories is that servant leadership focuses on humility, authenticity, and interpersonal acceptance, none of which are an explicit element of transformational leadership. More specifically, transformational leaders focus on organizational objectives; they inspire their followers to higher performance for the sake of the organization. Servant-leaders focus more on concern for their followers by creating conditions that enhance followers' well-being and functioning and thereby facilitate the realization of a shared vision; servant-leaders trust followers to do what is necessary for the organization (Stone et al., 2004).

The first empirical study on the difference between transformational and servant leadership (Parolini, Patterson, & Winston, 2009) focused on the distinction that for servant-leaders their followers' needs are the primary aim, whereas transformational leaders are more directed toward organizational goals. A sample of 511 persons working in different types of organizations like corporations, nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, and religious organizations filled out 19 semantic differential scales. Discriminant analysis confirmed that, compared to transformational leaders, servant-leaders are perceived as focusing more on the needs of the individual; their allegiance lies more with the individual than with the organization, while the opposite indeed holds for transformational leaders. Participants expect servant-leaders to choose to serve first, to be more unconventional and more likely to give freedom to subordinates.

Second, I compare servant leadership with authentic leadership, which has been defined extensively by Avolio and Gardner (2005) as a root concept underlying positive leadership approaches. A fundamental assertion is that authentic leaders work through an increased self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing to encourage authenticity in their followers. Authenticity is closely related to expressing the "true self," expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings (Harter, 2002). It focuses on owning one's personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, or beliefs. The usual view of

authenticity distinguishes between outer behavior and an inner realm of intentions, needs, interests, beliefs, and desires, which are viewed as determinants of behavior. Authenticity is also about a way of life that has cumulateness and purpose as a whole (Heidegger, 1962). There is a strong sense of accountability to oneself and to others. One takes responsibility for one's life and for the choices made.

Although authentic leadership development theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) is positioned as a broad and comprehensive theory, the core aspect of authentic leadership is that leadership is an expression of the "true self" (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Within the measure of authentic leadership by Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson (2008), this is operationalized as focusing on being authentic in one's interaction with others and being true to one's inner thoughts while showing this in consistent behavior and with an open mind and the willingness to change (see example items in the appendix of Walumbwa et al., 2008). Comparing this operationalization of authentic leadership with the six servant leadership characteristics, one can see the overlap with two characteristics, namely, authenticity and humility. With its explicit theoretical roots in authenticity theory, authenticity itself obviously is more an issue of authentic leadership. With respect to humility, only the willingness to learn can be found in authentic leadership too; the willingness to stand back and give room to others is missing. Moreover, none of the other four servant leadership characteristics are explicitly positioned or measured as belonging to the core of authentic leadership. Therefore, there is also a possibility that a leader works authentically from agency theory to increase shareholder value, believing that it is the moral obligation of a manager. This puts limits to authentic leadership as a core theory for positive leadership. Working from a stewardship perspective, taking into account all stakeholders is, however, an explicit element of servant leadership theory. As such, I would like to incorporate authentic leadership into servant leadership theory, with its explicit attention to empowerment, stewardship, and providing direction, in particular.

The third leadership theory that shows similarity with servant leadership is ethical leadership. Brown, Trevino, and Harrison (2005) have defined it as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making" (p. 120). Ethical leadership is a more normative approach that focuses on the question of appropriate behavior in organizations. It is similar to servant leadership in terms of caring for people, integrity, trustworthiness, and serving the good of the whole. The two-way communication mentioned in the definition sounds similar to Greenleaf's emphasis on persuasion and an open culture.

In ethical leadership the emphasis is more on directive and normative behavior, whereas servant leadership has a stronger focus on the developmental aspect of the followers. The latter is focused not so much on how things should be done given the norms of the organization but, rather, on how people want to do things themselves and whether they are able to do so. Ethical leadership as defined and operationalized by Brown et al. (2005) introduces a leadership style that stresses the importance of the direct involvement of employees, building trust, and—above all—being ethical in one's behavior. Their operationalization of ethical leadership in a short one-dimensional 10-item scale uncovers the overlap and differences. Their items focus on making fair decisions, showing ethical behavior, listening, and having

the best interest of employees in mind; all of them apply to servant leadership as well. Taking the six key characteristics as the main point of comparison, the strongest overlap occurs with three characteristics, namely, empowering and developing people, humility, and stewardship. The other three key characteristics of servant leadership (authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction) are relatively unimportant in ethical leadership.

Servant leadership can also be linked to Level 5 leadership, a leadership style identified by Collins (2001) in his seminal work on successful long-lasting corporations. According to Collins, leadership in terms of professional will combined with personal humility is the key factor that allows companies to achieve a breakthrough in their long-term organizational performance. The definition of Level 5 leadership shows overlap with servant leadership in the need for humility in terms of the ability to stand back and the will to learn. Humility especially can distinguish good leaders from great leaders. It is defined as being modest, shunning public adulation, and strongly focusing on the success of the company. The overlap with servant leadership clearly lies in the servant leadership characteristics of humility and providing direction. On the other hand, Level 5 leadership is more focused on organizational success and less on developing followers (although the latter is mentioned in relation to preparing a successor). Elements like authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship are clearly missing from the definition of Level 5 leadership. This should not come as a surprise given the fact that shareholder value in terms of stock returns was the determining factor for companies to qualify as a "good to great" company in Collin's study.

Empowering leadership, the fifth leadership theory to be compared to servant leadership, has its roots in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and in participative goal-setting research (e.g., Erez & Arad, 1986). The employee's perspective and the leader's actions to involve others in decision making are regarded as central. It emphasizes employee self-influence processes and actively encourages followers to lead themselves to self-direction and self-motivation (Pearce & Sims, 2002). It may be clear that empowering leadership theory overlaps with servant leadership. The first characteristic of servant leadership, empowering and developing people, is clearly similar to empowering leadership in that it emphasizes the delegation of authority to increase intrinsic motivation, accentuating accountability by giving people clear goals to strive for but also holding them responsible for achieving these goals and requiring managers to share knowledge and information to ensure that employees develop the necessary skills. Servant leadership theory takes care of those elements and elaborates on this characteristic by also including the other five characteristics, none of which are explicitly formulated as part of empowering leadership. Servant leadership theory can, therefore, be seen as a more elaborate view on leadership.

Spiritual leadership is the sixth leadership theory that shows similarities with servant leadership. Recent definitions of spirituality at the workplace focus on values and organizational practices similar to those of servant leadership (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008). A servant-leader sets goals, makes work meaningful, and builds on the strengths of followers. Similarly, spiritual facilitation at work emphasizes a sense of meaning at work and focuses on organizational values that allow for a feeling of transcendence and a feeling of connectedness to others (Pawar, 2008). According to Fry and Slocum (2008), spiritual leadership starts with creating a vision through which a sense of calling can be experienced and establishing a culture that helps to intrinsically motivate both oneself as leader and the

people within one's team or organization and helps followers find a sense of meaning. Through establishing a culture based on altruistic love, followers feel understood and appreciated. The resulting organizational culture gives employees a sense of calling; they feel part of a community.

A problem with the current empirical research on spiritual leadership is that it remains unclear what kind of behavior actually is associated with spiritual leadership. Fry's (2003) operationalization of spiritual leadership focuses on organizational culture rather than on actual leadership behavior. As such, despite some overlap in the proposed outcomes in terms of experiencing life as a calling and feeling understood and appreciated, servant leadership theory seems a more sophisticated theory that explicates the leader–follower relationship. Besides, it has been positioned by Greenleaf as a secular theory, thereby avoiding the lack of clarity and confusion that at present comes with the term *spirituality* at work, which according to Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) may mean different things to different people.

The final leadership theory that I compare servant leadership to is self-sacrificing leadership. Self-sacrifice is defined by Choi and Mai-Dalton (1999: 399) as “the total/partial abandonment, and/or permanent/temporary postponement of personal interests, privileges, or welfare in the (1) division of labor, (2) distribution of rewards, and (3) exercise of power.” The self-sacrificing behavior of the leader is proposed by these authors to lead to more charisma, legitimacy, and reciprocity. Recent studies confirm these propositions by showing that followers from leaders who show self-sacrificing behavior exhibit higher positive emotions and a stronger willingness to work together (De Cremer, 2006), are more motivated toward prosocial behavior (De Cremer, Mayer, Schouten, & Bardes, 2009), and rate their leaders as more effective (Van Knippenberg & Van Knippenberg, 2005).

Contrary to servant leadership, however, self-sacrificing leadership, with its roots in transformational leadership, focuses primarily on the organization instead of the followers (Matteson & Irving, 2005). Nevertheless, it is to be expected that similar psychological processes will appear as in followers of servant-leaders. Singh and Krishnan (2008) showed that self-sacrifice as defined by Choi and Mai-Dalton is closely related to altruism, defined as acting prosocial toward others in the organizations (i.e., “putting others first”). In two studies on the quality of personal relationships in terms of social support and trust (Crocker & Canevello, 2008), the reciprocal character of working with compassionate goals was also shown. The most relevant finding for the servant leadership context is that people who relate to others with compassionate goals create a supportive environment as long as their goals are not self-oriented. As such, these studies on self-sacrificing leadership and on working with compassionate goals in relationships provide the first evidence for the possible existence of Greenleaf's basic proposition that the reciprocal test for servant leadership is that the followers become servant-leaders themselves.

In conclusion, servant leadership theory has both similarities and differences with other leadership theories. None of the theories described above incorporates all six key characteristics, which puts servant leadership in a unique position. Additionally, servant leadership theory distinctively specifies a combined motivation to be(come) a leader with a need to serve that is at the foundation of these behaviors, and it is most explicit in emphasizing the importance of follower outcomes in terms of personal growth without necessarily being

related to organizational outcomes. In the fourth section these aspects will be discussed in more detail. Here too lies part of the uniqueness of servant leadership.

## **Operationalizing Servant Leadership Behavior**

To better understand and study the impact of servant leadership, there is need for a reliable and validated instrument that targets the key dimensions of servant leadership behavior. It can provide a comprehensive operational definition and help bring conceptual clarity and order to the servant leadership literature (Page & Wong, 2000). Regrettably, the fact that several researchers have developed their own measures, sometimes loosely building on previous work but mostly building from their own interpretation of Greenleaf's writings, has not been helpful. Therefore, an overview of the measures available to date is given first (see Table 1). This provides insight into how servant leadership theory has been operationalized. In addition, the communalities between these measures are described to show how the dimensions brought forward in the measures are part of the six key characteristics described above (see Table 2). Putting the measures together in this way enhances our current understanding of servant leadership behavior, how to recognize it, and how to measure it.

### *The Measurement of Servant Leadership*

The first measure of servant leadership was developed by Laub (1999). He determined the essential characteristics of servant leadership from a comprehensive review of the available literature combined with a Delphi survey among experts that resulted in six clusters of servant leadership. Items were formulated in terms of organizational culture and leadership in general. Not surprisingly, a factor analysis showed that the instrument had only two underlying dimensions—one focusing on the organization and the other on leadership—reflecting the following underlying perspectives: the organization as a whole, its top leaders, and the experience of the follower. Given the high correlations between the mean scores on the six clusters, the six dimensionality of the measure was questioned. Therefore, Laub concluded that the overall score be recommended for research purposes. Thus, despite conceptually covering all six servant leadership characteristics, its operationalization lost its concept multidimensional character. Laub's model was an important contribution to the scientific servant leadership research in that it was and still is used in several PhD studies and has given the first push toward empirical research. It can still be useful to determine to what extent an organization has a servant leadership culture. Furthermore, it has helped shape the thinking in the theorizing about servant leadership (e.g., see Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004).

The second instrument that has been used for some years now is Page and Wong's (2000) Servant Leadership Profile. Starting with an extensive literature review, they formulated 99 items divided over 12 categories. Their first data analysis from a sample of 1,157 persons resulted in eight dimensions. In later versions the number of dimensions dropped, via seven, to five (Wong & Davey, 2007). An attempt by Dennis and Winston (2003) to replicate the factor structure, however, failed and revealed a three-dimensional structure among

**Table 1**  
**The Measurement of Servant Leadership**

	Laub (1999)	Wong & Davey (2007)	Barbuto & Wheeler (2006)	Dennis & Bocarnea (2005)	Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson (2008)	Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora (2008)	Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (in press)
Development samples	847 people from 41 organizations	24 leaders, self-rating; 1,157 people from diverse backgrounds	388 people rating leaders in leadership training seminar	250, 406, and 300 people from diverse occupational backgrounds	298 undergraduate students; 182 people in production and distribution company	277 graduate students	1,571 people in eight samples from two countries and diverse occupational backgrounds
Methodology	Literature review; Delphi study of experts; exploratory factor analysis	Literature review; exploratory factor analysis	Literature review; face validity; exploratory factor analysis	Literature review; exploratory factor analysis	Literature review; exploratory factor analysis; confirmatory factor analysis	Literature review; content expert validation; confirmatory factor analysis	Literature review; interviews with experts; exploratory factor analysis; confirmatory factor analysis
Number of items	43	62	23	23	28	35	30
Internal consistency	.90 to .93	Not reported	.82 to .92	.89 to .92; not reported for 3-item scales	.76 to .86	.72 to .93	.69 to .91

**Table 2**  
**Key Characteristics of Servant Leadership Related to Measurement Dimensions**

Key characteristics	Laub (1999)	Wong & Davey (2007)	Barbutto & Wheeler (2006)	Dennis & Bocarnea (2005)	Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson (2008)	Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora (2008)	Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (in press)
Empowering and developing people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serving and developing others</li> <li>• Consulting and involving others</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowerment</li> <li>• Trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowering subordinates and succeed</li> <li>• Helping subordinates grow</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transforming influence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowerment</li> </ul>
Humility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shares leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Humility and selflessness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Altruistic calling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Humility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Putting subordinates first</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voluntary subordination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Humility</li> </ul>
Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Displays authenticity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modeling integrity and authenticity</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authentic self</li> <li>• Transcendental spirituality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authenticity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standing back</li> <li>• Authenticity</li> </ul>
Interpersonal acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Values people</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional healing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agapao love</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional healing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Covenantal relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forgiveness</li> </ul>
Providing direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inspiring and influencing others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persuasive mapping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conceptual skills</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Courage</li> </ul>
Stewardship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Builds community</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational stewardship</li> <li>• Wisdom</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating value for the community</li> <li>• Behaving ethically</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsible morality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stewardship</li> </ul>

540 respondents. The greatest problem of this measure seems to be the factorial validity. A further limitation is that its five-dimensional version only covers four out of six characteristics.

Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) introduced an instrument aimed to measure the 10 characteristics described by Spears to which they added an 11th characteristic: calling. For each characteristic, 5 to 7 items were developed. Fifty-six items were tested on face validity. Exploratory factor analysis resulted in a five-dimensional instrument. Regretfully, an attempt to replicate their findings with a South African sample failed, indicating that this instrument might actually be only one dimensional (Dannhauser & Boshoff, 2007). However, Sun and Wang (2009) suggested that the factorial validity of the five dimensions may still hold by deleting the problematic items and shortening the instrument to 15 items, with 3 items for each subscale. Yet, this instrument too covers only 4 out of 6 characteristics.

Dennis and Bocarnea (2005) developed an instrument directly related to Patterson's (2003) seven-dimensional model. The instrument was developed in several stages, starting with an extensive literature review and expert review, followed by statistical analyses and modifications in three samples. Recently, this instrument has been translated into Spanish and studied in a Latin American context (McIntosh & Irving, 2008). This study confirmed the reliability for only three of the scales: love, empowerment, and vision. Not surprisingly, therefore, there is also a shortened adapted version available of 18 items divided over three dimensions: humility, service, and vision (Hale & Fields, 2007). This adapted version seems to be the most up-to-date version, given its use in a recent study in a Filipino context (West, Bocarnea, & Maranon, 2009). Regretfully, it represents only half of the servant leadership characteristics.

Recently, Sendjaya et al. (2008) came up with an instrument consisting of 35 items representing 22 characteristics divided over six core dimensions. It was developed after extensive literature review and content expert validation. A sample of 277 graduate students was used, and data were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis. Regretfully, the authors tested only the one dimensionality of each of the six core dimensions separately. No data were presented on the factorial validity of the overall six-dimensional model. Given the high intercorrelations between the dimensions—ranging between .66 and .87—this is a point of concern. Therefore, the issue of factorial validity might be interesting to address in future studies.

Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008) developed a scale based on nine dimensions from the literature. An 85-item version was tested in two samples, one consisting of 298 undergraduate students and one consisting of 182 individuals working at a production and distribution company. Exploratory factor analysis resulted in a seven-dimensional instrument of 28 items in the first sample, which was confirmed with confirmatory factor analysis in the second sample. The instrument covers four of the characteristics: empowering and developing people, humility, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship. Although conceptual skills was placed as an element of providing direction in Table 2, it would probably be better to see it as an antecedent.

The latest addition to the fast-growing number of servant leadership measures was developed by Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (in press). After an extensive literature review, 99 items were formulated representing eight dimensions. In three steps, a combined exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis approach resulted in an eight-dimensional measure of 30 items. The original development samples were in Dutch; confirmatory factor analysis

for an English-language (U.K.) sample confirmed the factorial structure. It seems to be the only instrument with a good factorial structure that covers all six key characteristics of servant leadership.

In addition to these multidimensional instruments, at least two one-dimensional measures were developed. Reinke (2003, 2004) developed a short 7-item measure that encompasses items on openness, vision, and stewardship. Ehrhart (2004) developed a 14-item measure with items illustrating two aspects of servant leadership: ethical behavior and prioritization of subordinates' concerns. Although easy to apply, the great handicap of these one-dimensional measures is their inability, as the term implies, to distinguish between different servant leadership dimensions. This precludes insight into their underlying mechanisms.

## **Antecedents and Consequences of Servant Leadership**

The writings and thinking of Greenleaf, as we have seen, lay the foundation for the theoretical framework presented in Figure 1. This framework combines insights already available in the literature with new theoretical perspectives that may help us better understand the full process of servant leadership. The model puts forward that the cornerstone of servant leadership lies in the combined motivation to lead with a need to serve. It acknowledges the personal characteristics and the cultural aspects that are associated with this motivation. The resulting servant leadership characteristics, as experienced by followers, have their influence both on the individual leader–follower relationship and on the general psychological environment within a team or organization, which in turn are expected to influence the followers on three levels, that is, on the individual level, self-actualization, positive job attitudes and increased performance; on the team level, increased team effectiveness; and on the organizational level, a stronger focus on sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR). The model incorporates a feedback loop from the follower back to leader behavior to acknowledge the reciprocal nature between leader and follower.

An important issue is the interrelatedness of the key characteristics, antecedents, and outcomes. The idea behind the model depicted in Figure 1 is to reveal the underlying processes of servant leadership, combining insights from the main theoretical models and empirical research. It might be good to realize that for the most part the propositions put forward in this model are based on theory, on conceptual articles on servant leadership, and—when available—on evidence from related fields. Presently, most empirical studies on servant leadership specifically either focus on measurement development or on its relation with follower outcomes. In this section, first the antecedents of becoming a servant-leader are described, followed by the influence of servant leadership on the interpersonal relationship with followers and on the psychological climate within an organization or a team. Finally, the main outcomes of servant leadership are described.

### *The Motivation to Become a Servant-Leader*

The need to serve combined with a motivation to lead is the basis of the model. Studying servant leadership requires the explicit acknowledgment that we are dealing with a specific

approach to power. Internalized values such as honesty, integrity, fairness, and justice are characteristics that are expected to significantly impact leader behavior (Russell, 2001). As such, insight into motivational aspects may be of great value. Surprisingly, despite its prominence and relevance in servant leadership theory, the motivational aspect of servant leadership has hardly been studied. It has not been incorporated in any of the multidimensional measures that are described in the present article.

Power motivation refers to an underlying need for impact, to be strong and influential (McClelland & Burnham, 1976). Andersen (2009) argued—based on empirical evidence—that leaders with a high need for power are more effective. Relating this to servant leadership, it could be that it is not so much about a low need for power—as was suggested by Graham (1991)—but about a different way of dealing with power. More recently, the positive use of power is elaborately dealt with in a study by Frieze and Boneva (2001), who described the helping power motivation. This describes people with a need for power who want to use it to help and care for others. Patterson's (2003) model depicts how servant leadership begins with *agapao* love, which encourages humility and altruism. *Agapao love* is the Greek term for moral love, which means doing the right thing at the right time and for the right reason. The gifts and talents of followers become the focus of leadership. It results in a different type of leadership than the affiliative leader, who has a strong need to be liked, as described by McClelland and Burnham (1976). In the model, as depicted in Figure 1, it is therefore proposed that for servant-leaders this need for power is combined with a need to serve. Greenleaf (1977) already mentioned this combined motivation by stating that it starts with a need to serve that leads to a motivation to lead. The other way around is possible too, going from a motivation to lead to incorporating a serving attitude.

It may be clear by now that servant-leaders combine—as the term implicates—leading and serving. Two studies provide some evidence for this position. With multilevel designs, the studies investigated what is needed to become a servant-leader in terms of personality, values, and motivation. Evidence for the above proposition comes indirectly from a study by Washington, Sutton, and Field (2006) into the relationship between leaders' ratings of their agreeableness and ratings of servant leadership as perceived by their followers. Agreeableness refers to that part of the Big Five factor model of personality that emphasizes altruism. Being agreeable is related to generosity and a greater willingness to help others. The motivation for leadership comes from this interest and from empathy for other people.

Explicit attention to a leader's motivation to serve was given by Ng, Koh, and Goh (2008) in a short scale that was specifically designed to measure the motivational state that leads to servant leadership behavior. This motivational state is unique in that it focuses exclusively on the desire to serve as a leader, which was confirmed by their results. Followers experienced a higher leader-member exchange (LMX) quality in the relationship with leaders who worked from a motivation to serve.

In Figure 1, the dotted line surrounding both the motivational aspects and the key characteristics indicates that in combination they form the core of servant leadership. A true understanding of the uniqueness of servant leadership starts with studying both aspects in their interrelatedness and impact.

### *Individual Characteristics*

*Self-determination* has been positioned as an essential condition to be able to act as a servant-leader (Van Dierendonck et al., 2009). To be self-determined means to experience a sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's own actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Self-determination follows from fulfilling three basic psychological needs. These innate psychological needs are feeling competent, feeling connected to others, and feeling autonomous. When these needs are satisfied, enhanced self-motivation and mental health will follow. A self-determined person will be better in the use of personal resources, in building strong and positive relationships, and in helping others develop their self-determination. Therefore, instead of exerting power by controlling and directing people in an authoritarian way, self-determined leaders are able to work from an integrated perspective where power is not sought for its own sake. As such, it is expected that the power that comes with a leadership position is used to provide others with the opportunity to become self-determined as well.

*Moral cognitive development* was formulated by Kohlberg (1969) to describe the different stages through which people develop their reasoning and values that facilitate just and benevolent reasons behind social interactions. Kohlberg described six stages in the development from childhood to adulthood in which a person becomes aware of the complexity of distinguishing between right and wrong. In the highest—sixth—level, mutual respect becomes the universal guiding principle. Especially at this level, imagining how things look from the perspective of the other person becomes part of the decision and reasoning process. A recent comprehensive meta-analysis (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010) confirmed its importance both for ethical intentions and for ethical behavior. For servant leadership, it can, therefore, be expected that if an individual moves toward the higher stages of moral reasoning, it will become more likely that such an individual will start to act as a servant-leader.

*Cognitive complexity* is the third individual characteristic that may play an influential role in a person's development toward servant leadership. Cognitive complexity reveals a person's ability to perceive social behavior in a differentiated fashion (Bieri, 1955). Persons high on cognitive complexity can see dimensions that are missed by people with low cognitive complexity. It allows for a more accurate judgment of social situations. As may be clear from the six characteristics of servant leadership described in this article, servant leadership asks for a balancing act between providing direction and standing back to allow others their experience. It involves being able to think beyond present-day needs, foreseeing outcomes of situations, and being able to think through seemingly conflicting situations. It involves the capacity to overcome differences and see the leitmotiv behind them. Consequently, it is likely that the capacity for cognitive complexity will be positively related to servant leadership.

### *Culture*

To understand the possible effects of culture on servant leadership, I draw from the insights gained in the GLOBE study of leadership (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Two cultural dimensions are most likely to influence the occurrence of servant leadership within organizations, namely, humane orientation and power distance.

*Humane orientation* is defined by Kabasakal and Bodur (2004: 569) as “the degree to which an organization or society encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, friendly, generous, caring and kind to others.” It is placed in context with Aristotle’s ideal of friendship and Socrates’s ideology that friendship is a fundamental human need. Winston and Ryan (2008) argued that the humane orientation construct of the GLOBE research program is closely related to servant leadership, with its focus on care, concern, and benevolence toward others. Examples of countries where the societal practices show high scores on human orientation are Zambia, Philippines, Ireland, Malaysia, Thailand, and Egypt. Especially, Patterson’s model of servant leadership with its focus on *agapao* love as the starting point for servant leadership shows overlap to a humane orientation. In cultures characterized by a strong humane orientation, there is a stronger focus on working from acknowledging the need to belong and taking care of others. A humane orientation is driven by cultural values such as concern about others, being sensitive toward others, being friendly, and tolerating mistakes (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2004). Consequently, it is expected that in these cultures leaders will display higher attention for empowerment, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship.

*Power distance* can be defined as “the extent to which a community accepts and endorses authority, power differences and status privileges orientation” (Carl, Gupta, & Javidan, 2004: 513). In cultures with high power distance, one is expected to be more obedient to authority figures like parents, elders, and leaders. Organizations tend to be more centralized. In such cultures, large differences in power are expected and accepted. In cultures with low power distance, decision making is more decentralized, with less emphasis on formal respect and deference. Countries with low power distance are, for example, the Netherlands and Denmark (Carl et al., 2004). As hypothesized in stewardship theory (Davis et al., 1997), a culture with a low power distance is expected to be more encouraging toward developing servant leadership within an organization because the relationship between leader and follower is based on a more equal footing. Low power distance especially facilitates leadership that is less focused on self-protection. With its greater value on the equality between leader and follower, a reciprocal relationship with a strong focus on personal growth—an essential element of servant leadership—is more likely to develop (Davis et al., 1997).

### *The Relationship Between Servant-Leader and Follower*

At the core of the relationship between the servant-leader and follower stands the leader’s belief in the intrinsic value of each individual; it is all about recognition, acknowledgement, and the realization of each person’s abilities and what the person can still learn (Greenleaf, 1998). Leaders who show humility by acknowledging that they do not have all the answers, by being true to themselves, and by their interpersonal accepting attitude create a working environment where followers feel safe and trusted. Following Ng et al. (2008), LMX theory is used to understand the inherent quality of the relationship between servant-leader and follower. LMX theory was explicitly put forward as a relationship-based approach to leadership (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975) and thus best represents the relational dynamics between servant-leader and follower. Relationships of this kind are characterized by mutual trust, respect, and obligation. Although several multidimensional conceptualizations of LMX exist

(see Ferris et al., 2009), empirical support seems most strong for Liden and Maslyn's (1998) four-dimensional model that consists of affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect. Affect refers to positive feelings toward and a liking for the leader. Loyalty shows in being faithful and supportive and in backing each other. Contribution is the extent that one perceives the other as working toward shared goals. Respect is closely related to a feeling of trust and holding the other person in high regard (Dienesch & Liden, 1986).

To build this high-quality relationship, servant-leaders rely on persuasion in their discussions with followers. There is a strong focus on striving toward consensus in the teams they lead. Persuasion combines several influence tactics, for example, the use of explanations, reasoning, and factual evidence; apprising; inspirational appeals; and consultations. In the end, people follow a servant-leader "voluntarily, because they are persuaded that the leader's path is the right one for them" (Greenleaf, 1998: 44); a leader trusts the others' intuitive sense to discover for themselves which is the right path to take. The empowering and developmental behaviors shown by servant-leaders, with the right mixture of providing autonomy and direction, are prone to result in a high-quality dyadic relationship, which in turn is associated with higher engagement in challenging tasks.

### *The Psychological Climate*

Servant leadership is viewed as leadership that is beneficial to organizations by awaking, engaging, and developing employees. According to McGee-Cooper and Looper (2001), servant-leaders provide direction by emphasizing the goals of the organization, its role in society, and the separate roles of the employees. A safe psychological climate plays a central role in realizing this. People are well informed about the organizational strategy. An atmosphere is created where there is room to learn yet also to make mistakes. Leadership behavior characterized by humility, authenticity, and interpersonal acceptance is hereby essential. Additionally, a servant-leader's focus on empowerment will create a climate where decisions are made in a process of information gathering and where time is taken for reflection. Thus, employees feel safe to use their knowledge and are focused on continuous development and learning. The stewardship characteristic of servant-leaders is exemplified by their focus on building community (McGee-Cooper & Looper, 2001) and by emphasizing strong interpersonal relationships—a bonding—within the organization. Feelings of trust and fairness are seen as essential elements of a safe psychological climate to handle challenging times.

Interpersonal trust is a must for long-term effective relationships. It is believed to be of influence both on the process within a team and on performance (Dirks, 1999). Most definitions of trust deal with the willingness to be vulnerable to the other party and regarding the person as dependable. We would therefore expect servant leadership and trust to be closely related in survey studies. In the following studies, support for this was found. Reinke (2003) found a correlation of .84 between servant leadership and trust in management among a sample of civil servants. Dannhauser and Boshoff (2006) also reported a correlation of .86 among South African car salesmen. A study by Joseph and Winston (2005) among a convenience sample of employees in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago confirmed this shared variance. Based on these high correlations one could argue whether trust in management is

synonymous with servant leadership. The items used in these studies certainly point in that direction. A suggestion for future research would be to operationalize trust in nonleadership terms so that we get a better understanding of how servant leadership and organizational trust are related.

With regard to fairness, Mayer, Bardes, and Piccolo (2008) state several reasons why fairness is important for servant-leaders. That is, servant-leaders are sensitive to the needs of followers and are therefore likely to treat them in an interpersonally sensitive manner. The ethical orientation of servant-leaders will encourage them to make sure that they make the right decisions. Their focus on the growth and well-being of followers is likely to be instrumental for fair rewards. In a study of business undergraduates, Mayer et al. (2008) showed that servant leadership was indeed related to job satisfaction through organizational justice and overall psychological need satisfaction. The importance of servant leadership for perceptions of organizational justice in this study was a confirmation of a similar finding in Ehrhart's (2004) study.

### *Follower Outcomes of Servant Leadership*

Because servant leadership is a people-centered leadership style, evidence is expected to show that servant-leaders have more satisfied, more committed, and better performing employees. It is in this area that most empirical support is available, provided by cross-sectional studies published in peer-reviewed journals (see the appendix for an overview). Servant-leaders work toward positive job attitudes by encouraging the psychological needs of their followers. Based on the servant leadership literature, three dimensions of follower outcomes are differentiated that most closely follow Greenleaf's quotation at the beginning of this article: personal growth in terms of self-actualization; becoming healthier, wiser, free, and more autonomous in terms of positive job attitudes; and becoming servants themselves in terms of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and collaborative team work.

Based on meta-analytic evidence from leadership research in general, it can be expected that a high-quality LMX relationship, trust, and fairness positively influence followers' personal growth, job attitude, and performance. The value of a high-quality relationship was already shown by Gerstner and Day (1997). Their meta-analysis showed that a high LMX relationship was related to performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, low turnover intentions, and feeling competent. More recently, the meta-analysis by Ilies, Nahrgang, and Morgeson (2007) reported a moderately strong relationship between LMX and citizenship behaviors. The proposed positive relationship between servant leadership and job attitudes was also confirmed in a meta-analysis on leadership behavioral integrity—a concept related to servant leadership with its focus on a leader's commitment to values and principles and aligning words and deeds (Davis & Rothstein, 2006). Finally, Dirks and Ferrin (2002) confirmed that trust in leadership was clearly related to job performance, OCB, and job satisfaction.

*Self-actualization* has a central spot in the thinking of psychologists such as Rogers, Fromm, Maslow, and Allport (Jahoda, 1958). According to these authors, striving for self-actualization and personal growth is a central motivator in a person's life. It refers to a feeling

of continuous personal development and of realizing one's potential. It is related to having self-respect and self-acceptance, to a positive attitude about oneself, and to accepting one's positive and negative qualities. Self-actualization gives life meaning. Meaningfulness through self-actualization includes a sense of wholeness and purpose in life. Indirect support for this position was reported by Mayer et al. (2008), whose study showed the relevance of servant leadership to followers' psychological needs, and by Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, and Roberts (2008), whose study showed that servant leadership strengthened a promotion focus (i.e., working with goals related to growth, pursuing ideals, and seeking opportunities to achieve aspirations) among followers.

*Positive job attitudes* are most frequently studied with regard to servant leadership in terms of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, empowerment, and engagement. Results from cross-sectional studies showed evidence for their interrelatedness. Most of these studies are doctoral dissertations that use correlational data. For example, in his study among persons working in different organizations, Hebert (2003) reported correlations as high as .70 for overall and intrinsic job satisfaction. Preliminary evidence for the relation between servant leadership and empowerment was reported by Earnhardt (2008) in a military context and by Horsman (2001) in a convenience sample of 608 employees in 93 organizations from the northwestern region of the United States and in Canada. The relevance of servant leadership for organizational commitment was reported in a South African sample (Dannhauser & Boshoff, 2007), a Filipino sample (West & Bocarnea, 2008), and a U.S. sample (Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009a).

*Performance* is studied in terms of OCB and team effectiveness. According to Graham (1995), servant leadership positively influences OCB because it encourages a higher level of moral reasoning in followers. Universal principles are applied by leaders to help followers find the balance between self-interest and the interest of others. The Ng et al. (2008) study also confirmed that followers whose leader worked from a motivation to serve showed more helping OCB. Additionally, Neubert et al. (2008) found a correlation of .37 between servant leadership and self-reported helping behavior and creative behavior. Among salespersons, Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, and Roberts (2009b) reported a correlation of .24 between servant leadership and self-reported performance. More evidence of this proposed relation between servant leadership and follower behavior was found in a multilevel study on OCB by Ehrhart (2004). His most interesting results are the interrelatedness of manager ratings of departmental OCB with follower ratings of servant leadership behavior from the same manager. The study showed that servant leadership had a direct effect of .29 with helping OCB and .22 for conscientiousness OCB, thereby confirming servant leadership as a potential antecedent of unit-level OCB.

Servant leadership is also believed to have a positive influence on team effectiveness. Team leadership requires being goal directed, being able to handle different personalities within the group, creating a unified commitment, recognition, and so on. These are characteristics that are all closely related to those of servant leadership. In a study carried out in a nonprofit organization, Irving and Longbotham (2007) found moderate to high correlations between servant leadership and perceived team effectiveness. The most important leadership behaviors were providing accountability, being supportive, engaging in honest self-evaluation, fostering collaboration, having clear communication, and valuing the members in the team.

A meta-analysis on the role of leadership on team effectiveness (Burke, Stagl, Klein, Goodwin, Salas, & Halpin, 2006) confirmed its importance. Most notably for servant leadership was the impact of empowering leadership, which proved to be essential for team effectiveness. The primary actor was its strong influence on team learning.

### *Organizational Outcomes*

Research into the influence of servant leadership on CSR and building sustainable businesses is an area of societal interest. In a book on what he called “small giants,” Burlingham (2005) presented small- to medium-sized businesses whose policy it was not to place high return on investment as their primary goal but rather to emphasize the importance of creating a great place to work, building great relationships with all stakeholders, contributing to the community, and focusing on a high quality of life. Most of the owners of these companies had been influenced by the ideas behind servant leadership.

A study into the characteristics of leaders needed to integrate building a responsible business with the challenges of day-to-day operations emphasized the importance of integrity, open-mindedness, long-term perspective, ethical behavior, care for people, respectful communication, and managing responsibility outside the organization (Hind, Wilson, & Lenssen, 2009), all aspects that come close to the key servant leadership characteristics and the mediating processes formulated in this article. Furthermore, Jin and Drozdenko (2009) argued and showed that CSR is related to a more organic relationship-oriented organizational environment where fairness and trust are core values. In line with this, a study of 56 U.S. and Canadian firms by Waldman, Siegel, and Javidan (2006) investigated the relation between charismatic and transformational CEO leadership on the one hand and CSR on the other, hereby demonstrating the importance of leadership behavior that is aimed at bringing out the best in people. CSR is defined as involvement in some social good not required by law, which goes beyond the immediate interest of the firm and its shareholders. Interestingly, the charisma of the CEO—operationalized in terms of generated respect, communicating a mission, and high performance expectancies—was not related to increased CSR. Thus, the effects of personal charisma seem to be limited here. On the other hand, firms were more involved with strategic CSR where the CEO encouraged employees to look at things from different perspectives. Strategic CSR is important in product design businesses and environmental issues. Interestingly, no effect was found for socially oriented CSR. As such, to better understand the encouraging influence of the CEO on CSR, we need to go beyond transformational leadership. It would be interesting to investigate whether servant leadership may enhance a broader perspective on CSR, one that also focuses on social aspects such as community relations and diversity.

### *The Reciprocal Nature of the Leader–Follower Relationship*

In the model of servant leadership formulated in this article, motivation, individual characteristics, and culture are considered antecedents, and the quality of the relationship between

leader and follower and follower attitudes and performance are considered consequences. In addition, the reciprocal character of the relationship between leader and followers is included in the model. The behavior of servant-leaders may influence the job attitudes and behavior of followers, and their behavior and disposition may in turn have an influence on how they are treated.

This notion of an upward spiral that works in the interplay between leaders and followers was already put forward by Burns (1978). In his influential work, he described how leaders and followers engage in a mutual process of raising one another to higher levels of morality and motivation. It was introduced into the servant leadership literature by Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999). Russell and Stone (2002) elaborated on that model by placing servant leadership functional attributes in the center of a model, with core values of the leader as antecedents and organizational climate, job attitudes, and performance as consequences. Next, they described a feedback loop from organizational performance to servant leadership. In other words, they proposed an upward spiral whereby servant leadership influences the organizational climate, which in turn influences the employee attitudes and performance and vice versa.

## **Future Research**

With regard to future research, it is important to realize there are still some challenges to be met, as indicated by Whetstone (2002), who refers particularly to the following three aspects. First of all, servant leadership theory has a tendency of being too idealistic. Most of the earlier writings are rather normative and prescriptive, especially those referring to consultancy, the so-called how-to books. As such, the current trend of empirical descriptive research could not be more welcome. It is encouraging that through the development of several measures the first tests of the underlying mechanisms of servant leadership theory could be conducted. The information in this article may be of use in the selection of the proper measure for future studies. (For further information on this subject, the reader is referred to the framework in Tables 1 and 2.) A multidimensional measure is definitely required for future studies in order to get an in-depth insight into servant leadership.

Second, there is concern about the negative connotation of the word *servant*. This term suggests passivity and indecisiveness and, even more, letting go of power. Managers may dislike the term because it may imply softness and weakness, more appropriate for serving staff than for leaders. One way to tackle this problem may be to focus on the six key characteristics identified earlier in this article. It is likely that most, if not all, characteristics are generally recognized by managers as being essential for modern leadership.

The third aspect Whetstone (2002) refers to is the risk of manipulation by followers. The positive view on human nature that is embedded in servant leadership theory can also be found in Theory Y on human nature, assuming that people want to take responsibility and want to be self-directed. An exclusive use of this view by leaders can tempt followers who are aware that people also behave according to Theory X, the assumption that people try to avoid work and dislike responsibility (Bowie, 2000a). It is, therefore, important to realize that providing direction is definitely a key behavioral characteristic of servant leadership and that the

motivation to lead is an antecedent together with the need to serve. Both emphasize the leading role of servant-leaders.

To further develop the field of servant leadership, the following steps need to be taken with respect to its measurement (inspired by the exchange between Antonakis, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough, 2009): (1) Work with a measure that has demonstrated construct validity. Given the broadness of the theory, a multidimensional measure will be essential. Only two of the presently available measures show a stable factor structure across multiple samples and cover (most of) the terrain described by the key servant leadership characteristics: Liden et al. (2008) and Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (in press). (2) More research is needed to study the discriminant and convergent validity of these measures. One could question the extent to which they are interchangeable or complementary when it comes to predicting outcomes. (3) Study the incremental validity of servant leadership over other styles of leadership. Given the explosive expansion of leadership theories over the past few years, this is an essential issue for the leadership field in general. When studied in the organizational context, is it really possible for followers to actually differentiate between leadership styles that are given academic labels like *servant*, *transformational*, *authentic*, *ethical*, *empowering*, or *spiritual*? To what extent is it possible to translate a theoretically based difference into a practically relevant distinction?

To deal with these issues, insights gained from the use of sophisticated research designs may be of great use. All survey studies mentioned in this article were cross-sectional (with the exception of the study by Neubert et al., 2008). There is a clear need for longitudinal research to study the development of the interactions between leaders and followers. Apart from that, we have to cope with another methodological weakness of the field, namely, that some studies consisted of leaders estimating their own leadership behavior (e.g., Garber, Madigan, Click, & Fitzpatrick, 2009). Here, the perspective of the follower on a leader's behavior is clearly missing. To strengthen the internal validity, the experimental studies on self-sacrificing leadership can provide inspiration for similar studies on servant leadership.

In this global era, the cross-cultural validity of the servant leadership model becomes of interest. The overall model in this article states that a strong humane orientation and a low power distance will be instrumental for servant leadership. An important research question therefore is whether servant leadership is more likely to occur in countries high on humane orientation and low on power distance, to what extent servant leadership is experienced differently, and what the impact will be on outcome variables. First, empirical evidence for the global relevance of servant leadership in particular was found in a study by Hale and Fields (2007), who demonstrated with two samples (one from the United States and one from Ghana) the relevance of servant leadership in both countries. Although the results of the Ghanaese sample pointed to less servant leadership behavior, in both samples service and humility were related to the perception of leadership effectiveness. Indications for the relevance of servant leadership in the Asian context were found in a recent study by Sun and Wang (2009), who studied supervisors' ratings of their servant leadership behavior in relation to subordinate contextual performance and job satisfaction. In the Filipino context, servant leadership appears to be strongly related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment, with strongest correlations for the service dimension (West et al., 2009).

The few multilevel studies demonstrate the value of a multisource approach combining the perspective of both leaders and followers in terms of gaining insight into the leadership process. One way in which this multilevel perspective may play a role is in the influence of culture on leadership. Although the model suggests a direct link between culture and leader characteristics, it might be useful to examine the moderating influence of the cultural context on the effectiveness of leader behavior. For example, Wendt, Euwema, and Van Emmerik (2009) showed that the influence of leadership on team cohesiveness was stronger in individualistic societies versus collectivistic societies. Similarly, it can be argued that the stronger the fit between servant leadership behavior and the culture, the stronger its influence. A culture where servant leadership is closely related to the ideal leadership style will be more open to it.

Multilevel studies can also be helpful in disentangling the influence of the motivation to become a servant-leader on the effectiveness of leader behavior. The model proposes the interrelatedness of the motivation for leadership with leader behavior. In its present form, a mediating relation is hypothesized. Alternatively, it might be possible that their influence is interwoven in that it is not only what you do that matters but also why you do it. In other words, to be truly effective as a servant-leader one not only has to show the right behavior but also has to act from the right motivation. This reasoning hypothesizes that the alignment of motivation and behavior strengthens its impact.

A possible contribution of the conceptual model is that it may guide the development and evaluation of management development programs specifically focusing on servant leadership. There clearly is a need to understand the effectiveness of servant leadership developmental programs (e.g., Sipe & Frick, 2009). At present, there have been no publications on servant leadership interventions with a pre–post experimental–control group design. So, despite yearly conferences and a growing number of consultants offering programs on becoming a servant leader, we are in the dark about their real and long-lasting effectiveness.

The strong ethical focus of servant leadership raises the question how this may influence short-term profit (Giampetro-Meyer et al., 1998), especially when global competition asks for measures that may not seem consistent with its internal values. Different situations may demand different leadership styles (Smith et al., 2004). For example, one could question the suitability of servant leadership in profit versus nonprofit organizations, in private or public businesses, and so on. For a better understanding of similarities and differences, it is recommended to include additional measures of other leadership styles, such as transformational, transactional, or authentic.

Finally, servant leadership could also be studied outside organizations, for example, in the context of sports. Among 251 collegiate athletes, Hammermeister, Burton, Pickering, Chase, Westre, and Baldwin (2008) studied the impact of servant leadership as shown by the athletes' head coaches. Using a revised version of the leadership profile of Page and Wong (2000), three dimensions of servant leadership could be differentiated: trust/inclusion, humility, and service. The results showed that athletes with a servant-leader head coach were more satisfied with their performance. Interesting is the authors' finding that athletes who work with so-called benevolent dictators, coaches whose behavior was high on trust/inclusion and

service while at the same time low on humility, scored highest on intrinsic motivation. It seems that particularly within this specific setting, humility was not a crucial element. On the contrary, it leadership combined with creating conditions for success that was crucial. These results also emphasize the importance of working with a multidimensional measure of servant leadership, given that in different contexts each of the key characteristics may have a different effect.

## Conclusion

The main aim of this article was to bring more clarity to a relatively new field of management research, namely, that of servant leadership. Although the primary goal was to use peer-reviewed empirical articles on servant leadership as the basis for the review, given the current state of this field this would mean that too much valuable information would have been lost. Especially, the papers presented at the yearly Servant Leadership Research Roundtable at Regent University are an important additional online resource. Examples of such contributions are books and books chapters by Greenleaf (e.g. 1996, 1998), Spears (1995), and Van Dierendonck et al. (2009); dissertations by Laub (1999) and Patterson (2003); and online sources such as those by Dannhauser and Boshoff (2006), Matteson and Irving (2005), and Wong and Davey (2007). Although not peer reviewed, these papers are included given their importance in influencing the current thinking on servant leadership.

Earlier conceptual models have sometimes confused behaviors with outcomes. Notwithstanding their importance, definitions based on outcomes leave one guessing on the actual leader behavior. As such, the most important contribution of this article is that it disentangled antecedents, behaviors, mediating processes, and outcomes. By focusing on the main reasoning underlying the theoretical models and on the empirical material available at present, a conceptual model could be developed including the key characteristics of servant leadership with the most important antecedents and consequences. It is argued that servant leadership is displayed by leaders who combine their motivation to lead with a need to serve. Personal characteristics and culture are positioned alongside the motivational dimension. Servant leadership is demonstrated by empowering and developing people; by expressing humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship; and by providing direction. A high-quality dyadic relationship, trust, and fairness are expected to be the most important mediating processes to encourage self-actualization, positive job attitudes, performance, and a stronger organizational focus on sustainability and CSR. Given the limited empirical evidence that presently is available, the logical next step is testing these propositions.

In conclusion, this overview shows that servant leadership is an intriguing new field of study for management researchers. The roots of this leadership theory can be traced back many centuries. Servant leadership may come close to what Plato suggested in *The Republic* as the ultimate form of leadership: leadership that focuses on the good of the whole and those in it (Williamson, 2008). The field is moving from being prescriptive to becoming descriptive. Hopefully, this review will be instrumental in that it encourages and directs future research.

## Appendix Peer-Reviewed Studies on Servant Leadership and Follower Outcomes

Study	Sample	Variables	Findings
Barbuto & Wheeler (2006)	388 persons rating leaders from counties in the midwestern United States	Servant leadership (SL) measure: Barbuto & Wheeler (2006) Outcomes: Extra effort, satisfaction, organizational effectiveness	Average correlations across SL dimensions: .22, .35, .44, respectively
Ehrhart (2004)	Analyzing unit are 120 departments with at least 5 respondents and their managers from a grocery store chain in the eastern region of the United States	SL measure: Ehrhart (2004) Outcome: Procedural justice climate, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB; employee and manager rated)	SL correlations with justice climate: .72; self-rated OCB: .57; manager-rated OCB: .24
Hale & Fields (2007)	60 people from Ghana; 97 people from the United States; two thirds in both samples worked in religious organizations	SL measure: based on Dennis & Bocarnea (2005) Outcome: leadership effectiveness	Average correlation across SL dimensions: .69
Irving & Longbotham (2007)	719 participants from the U.S. division of an international nonprofit organization	SL measure: Laub (1999) Outcome: Team effectiveness	SL explains 38% of the variance in team effectiveness
Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts (2009a)	501 salespersons drawn from a U.S. consumer panel	SL measure: Ehrhart (2004) Outcome: organizational commitment, turnover intention, job satisfaction, job stress	Correlations with SL: .67, -.39, .52, -.18, respectively
Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts (2009b)	501 salespersons drawn from a U.S. consumer panel	SL measure: Ehrhart (2004) Outcome: customer orientation, customer-directed extrarole performance, adaptive selling	Correlations with SL: .17, .24, .14, respectively
Joseph & Winston (2005)	Convenient sample of 69 persons	SL measure: Laub (1999) Outcome: leader trust, organizational trust	Correlations with SL: .64, .72, respectively
Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson (2008)	182 individuals from a midwestern company	SL measure: Liden et al. (2008) Outcome: organizational commitment, community citizenship behavior, in-role performance (supervisor rated)	Added explained variance of SL in addition to leader-member exchange: .04, .19, .05, respectively

(continued)

## Appendix (continued)

Study	Sample	Variables	Findings
Mayer, Bardes, & Piccolo (2008)	187 business undergraduates with work experience	SL measure: Ehrhart (2004) Outcome: organizational justice, need satisfaction, job satisfaction	Correlations with SL: .51, .42, .37, respectively
Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts (2008)	250 individuals working full-time	SL measure: Ehrhart (2004) Outcome: In-role performance, deviant behavior, helping behavior, creative behavior (all self-rated, 3 weeks later)	Correlations with SL: .01, -.08, .37, .37, respectively
Reinke (2003)	254 employees of a suburban county in Georgia	SL measure: Reinke (2003) Outcome: Trust	Correlation with trust: .84
Sun & Wang (2009)	209 paired supervisor-subordinate dyads from the Beijing region, China	SL measure: Barbuto & Wheeler (2006), rated by supervisors themselves Outcome: satisfaction with supervisor, perceived organizational support	Average correlations across SL dimensions: .10, .15, respectively
Washington, Sutton, & Field (2006)	283 employees rating 126 supervisors working at governmental organizations	SL measure: Dennis & Winston (2003) Outcome: supervisors' value of empathy, integrity, and competence	Correlations with SL: .48, .58, .57, respectively
West, Bocamea, & Maranon (2009)	164 respondents from professional organizations in the Philippines	SL measure: Hale & Fields (2007) Outcome: organizational commitment, job satisfaction, role clarity, perceived organizational support	Average correlation across SL dimensions: .46, .44, .55, .55, respectively

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