

Servant Leadership in Action:

Identity, Practice, and Application Across Ministry and Professional Contexts

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Abstract

Leadership plays an essential role in everyone's life. This thesis will examine servant leadership by uniting key opinions, definitions, and components into a cohesive framework for various contexts. A significant focus will be on servant leadership in religious ministry because of my personal experiences in leadership. Themes such as humility, empathy, service, selflessness, behaviors versus traits, and goal orientation will be analyzed to highlight their important roles in servant leadership.

The goal of this thesis is to explore how servant leadership can be effectively applied in ministerial and organizational settings. This will be accomplished through a literature review, personal reflection on my leadership roles, and future applications in my life. The first section will be a literature review of 5 different books discussing and explaining servant leadership in various ways. Personal reflection will be the next section. This will include an examination of my current leadership roles. Lastly, the future application section will synthesize findings from the previous two sections. Hopefully, this thesis will inspire others to reflect on their leadership positions and contemplate how a servant leadership style can benefit those they lead.

Introduction

My understanding of leadership began in high school through my involvement in a youth group, where I first encountered opportunities to serve and lead. At the time, however, I carried many doubts about my ability and suitability for leadership. As an introvert, effective leaders were naturally charismatic, outspoken, and confident individuals who easily command attention. Leadership seemed reserved for people with certain personality traits rather than something that could be learned and developed. Because I did not fit that image, I often hesitated to pursue leadership opportunities or view myself as capable of influencing others in meaningful ways.

Over time, these assumptions began to change. A pivotal moment occurred when my youth pastor acknowledged and affirmed my quieter personality and reframed it as a potential strength in leadership instead of a weakness. From his teaching and example, he taught me that consistent, often unseen acts of service can have a deeper and more lasting impact than charisma alone. This challenged my initial understanding of leadership by suggesting that influence is cultivated through service, intentionality, and meaningful relationships.

My perspective continued to develop through my involvement with the Western Oregon University Fellowship club. The community's environment and leadership culture were relational, empathetic, caring, intentional, and rooted in Christ's love. Instead of centering on authority, personal accomplishment, or numbers, the leaders

prioritized the well-being and growth of every person who they came in contact with. Observing and eventually participating in this leadership culture reinforced the idea that effective leadership is not driven by personality or position, it is a commitment to people.

These experiences sparked my interest in servant leadership as both a theological framework and practical model for leading across multiple contexts. Unlike approaches that are often associated with personality traits like confidence, charisma, assertiveness, and public visibility, servant leadership emphasizes a leader's willingness to invest in the growth of others. This distinction was significant because it changed leadership from something I thought I lacked into something I could develop and grow in. Instead of asking whether I possessed the traits of a leader, it encouraged me to ask whether I was willing to serve.

My experiences and changing perspective of leadership have also shaped my belief that servant leadership is suited for a variety of settings. As I observed and participated in leadership in youth ministry, campus ministry, family relationships, and organizational environments, I have seen that its effectiveness is not tied to a particular context. Its emphasis on humility, service, relational investment, and the development of others allows it to mold to diverse situations. Whether practiced in a church, nonprofit organization, educational setting, or business environment, leaders are responsible for influencing and serving others. Because servant leadership places people

at the center of leadership, it is a kind of leadership that is adaptable and effective across multiple contexts. This realization has led me to view servant leadership not simply as a ministry model, but as a holistic approach to leadership that can positively affect both ministry communities and professional organizations.

I seek to explore how servant leadership, rooted in humility, empathy, and service, can be understood as an identity driven model that is theoretically supported and practically effective across ministry and professional contexts. Through engagement with leadership literature, personal reflection, and future oriented application, I found that servant leadership redefines leadership as stewardship of others' growth rather than exercise of authority or control.

Literature Review:

Servant Leadership for Various Contexts

Definitions

Servant leadership offers an alternative to traditional leadership models that focus on authority, control, or charisma. At its core, servant leadership positions the leader's primary responsibility as serving those they lead. This emphasis serving the people being led creates the basis of a framework that is ethical, relational, and different from other leadership frameworks.

Across the literature, three consistent and interrelated themes emerge in defining servant leadership. First, servant leadership begins with serving others rather than self-interest. Second, it prioritizes the growth, development, and empowerment of followers. Third, it comes from an internal motivation and moral commitment that shapes a leader's actions and decisions. Together these themes establish servant leadership not just as a leadership style, but as a comprehensive philosophy of leadership practice.

The idea that servant leadership moves away from positional authority and toward ethical responsibility is especially evident in Robert Greenleaf's book, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Greenleaf writes that "the servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve" (Greenleaf 27). In Greenleaf's view, leadership comes from a prior

commitment to serve, making service the defining characteristic. Rather than pursuing leadership for power or status, servant leaders lead because they are motivated by a desire to meet the needs of others. This is the defining heart of servant leadership.

Peter Northouse expands on this idea by translating servant leadership into practical organizational behavior. He explains that servant leaders “put followers first, empower them, and help them develop their full personal capacities... and lead in ways that serve the greater good” (Northouse 225–226). Northouse's definition emphasizes that leadership involves more than directing others toward organizational goals; it includes actively investing in the development and success of followers. Both Northouse's and Greenleaf's definitions highlight leadership as a calling more than a technique. Servant leadership is an identity that shapes the leader's view of their position and the call for responsibility, care, and willingness to influence others for their benefit.

Sen Sendjaya reinforces this theme of service as the foundation of leadership by describing how servant leadership is an encompassing approach anchored by a leader's orientation toward service and authentic care for others (Sendjaya 1). His work emphasizes that servant leadership is not simply a strategy that leaders adopt but an enduring lifestyle that shapes how they view themselves and their relationships with others. This perspective is echoed by Simon Sinek who states in a compiled source *Leadership in Action* that “leadership... is about taking care of those in your charge”

(Blanchard 98). Both of these authors communicate that leadership is fundamentally relational and rooted in responsibility for others.

In addition to its ethical core, definitions of servant leadership carry spiritual and transformational implications. Sendjaya describes servant leadership as flowing from “an inner conviction that something or someone beyond self” (Sendjaya 92). This perspective is significant in ministry-centered models of leadership, where leadership is understood as stewardship. Similarly, Cullhane’s description of the servant leader as a shepherd responsible for “provision, protection, and presence” (Blanchard 87) highlights the spiritual, relational, and moral dimensions of leadership. Within this view, followers are viewed not as resources to be managed and controlled, they are viewed as individuals whose well-being and development deserve intentional care.

These perspectives collaboratively reveal broad agreement regarding the core nature of servant leadership. Although the authors emphasize different dimensions they consistently portray leadership as a responsibility directed toward the growth and well-being of others. This shared emphasis establishes the conceptual foundation for understanding servant leadership as both a philosophy and a practice applicable across a variety of contexts.

Foundations: Servant Identity & Motivation

A central theme throughout the servant leadership literature is that effective leadership begins with identity. Identity that the leader is servant first, and the motivation to serve others flows from this. This identity challenges common narratives that connect leadership with charisma, positional power, or ambition. Servant leadership instead begins with the choice to serve.

Robert K. Greenleaf, widely recognized as the founder of the modern servant leadership movement, writes in *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*: “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” (Greenleaf 27). Greenleaf’s distinction reverses common assumptions about leadership. Effective leadership does not begin with the desire to lead and later incorporate service. Service precedes leadership and provides the motivation for it. In this model, leadership comes from a commitment to meet the needs of others.

James C. Hunter builds on the foundation of motivation by emphasizing the role of character. In *The World’s Most Powerful Leadership Principle*, Hunter argues that leadership is grounded in moral substance. He writes, “Leadership is not about style. Rather, leadership is about substance. Personality deals with style while character deals with substance” (Hunter 143). This distinction again affirms that servant leadership is less about outward traits and more about the character and the qualities of a leader

that sustain meaningful influence over time. The question is not whether a person can lead, but whether they are willing to become the kind of person who deserves to lead, someone whose motivations are shaped by love, humility, and desiring the good for others.

Hunter further develops this idea through the concept of “volitional love,” which he defines as choosing to seek the good of others regardless of convenience or personal benefit (Hunter 53). This understanding reinforces the idea that servant leadership is more about intentional action instead of emotion. The effectiveness of a leader is not solely determined by personality type or natural ability, but by a commitment to humility, responsibility, and care for others.

While Greenleaf and Hunter focus primarily on service and character, Sen Sendjaya dives into the deeper motivation that sustains servant leadership. In *Personal and Organizational Excellence through Servant Leadership*, he argues that “servant leaders are shaped by an inner conviction that something or someone beyond self and the material world exists and makes life complete and meaningful” (Sendjaya 92). Senjaya introduces a spiritual dimension to leadership, suggesting that service is often motivated by values and beliefs that transcend personal ambition. Within ministry contexts, this “someone” is God, who provides an example, guide, and reason for motivation. Leaders in ministry are not merely managers of people; they are shepherds, mentors, and examples of Christlike humility.

This emphasis on internal motivation invites leaders to examine their own misconceptions about servant leadership. Because of the word servant, some critics assume the model requires passivity or weakness. Dave Ramsey warns against this in *Servant Leadership in Action*, observing that “When some leaders hear servant, they think subservient... They mistakenly think that a servant leader only takes orders and acts like a doormat” (Blanchard 288). He argues that servant leadership is not about giving up strength but about using that strength on behalf of others.

Simon Sinek mirrors this perspective when he states, “Leadership, it turns out, is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge” (Blanchard 98). Sinek’s statement captures a recurring theme throughout the literature, that leadership is relational. The measure of a leader’s effectiveness is not the organizational performance alone; it is also the extent to which they contribute to the development of those they influence.

Even in organizational contexts outside of ministry, the servant identity holds significant power. Frances Hesselbein, former CEO of the Girl Scouts of the USA, described leadership as “a matter of how to be, not how to do” (Blanchard 254) in *Servant Leadership in Action*. Her leadership was marked by an internal compass; values, discipline, and service that guided external action. This highlights the importance of personal values and character in shaping leadership behavior. Similarly, Colleen Barrett of Southwest Airlines, fostered a culture where “each of our People... [realizes] they

have the potential to be a leader” and where the leader’s job is “treating [employees] with Golden Rule behavior” (Blanchard 271). These examples show that the servant identity is something that can be developed and learned. They all demonstrate that servant leadership functions just as powerfully in corporations as it does in ministry when grounded in sincerity and identity.

Peter Northouse further connects servant identity to leadership outcomes in *Leadership: Theory and Practice* by arguing that servant leaders “put followers first, empower them, and help them develop their full personal capacities. Furthermore, servant leaders are ethical and lead in ways that serve the greater good of the organization, community, and society at large” (Northouse 225–226). His framework highlights the relationship between internal motivation and external impact. A leader’s commitment to serving others ultimately shapes how leadership is practiced and experienced.

In *Personal and Organizational Excellence through Servant Leadership* Sen Sendjaya expands this servant-identity by describing servant leadership as a “holistic approach” built on multiple dimensions: “(1) service orientation, (2) authenticity focus, (3) relational emphasis, (4) moral courage, (5) spiritual motivation, and (6) transforming influence” (Sendjaya 1). These dimensions portray leadership as both a personal and relational endeavor. Leadership is not simply something a person does; it reflects who that person is and how they understand their responsibility toward others.

Central to Sendjaya's framework is the concept of stewardship. Sendjaya writes that "In servant leadership relationships, therefore, the leaders act as stewards—they consider their followers as people who have been entrusted to them to be elevated to their better selves and to be what they are capable of becoming" (Sendjaya 2). This changes how power is understood. Servant leaders use influence to elevate and empower others instead of using influence to advance their own personal interests.

The relational nature of servant leadership is further emphasized by James Ferrell in *Servant Leadership in Action*. Ferrell asserts that what makes servant leaders so compelling is not their actions alone, but because people genuinely feel seen and appreciated by them, "What distinguishes true servant leaders and makes them so precious to us is not that they do things for us—although they do. No, we are grateful to them because we know that they see and value us" (Blanchard 131). This observation highlights the reality that service becomes meaningful when it is rooted in authentic concern for people. Followers respond to a leader's actions paired with the care and respect those actions communicate.

Together, these perspectives demonstrate that servant leadership originates in identity and motivation. Leadership begins with an internal commitment to serve, is sustained by characters, and is expressed through a genuine concern for the development and well-being of others. Before servant leadership becomes visible in

behavior, it is formed first in an individual's values, beliefs, and motivation that shape a leader's understanding of influence and responsibility.

Core Characteristics & Behaviors

If identity is the root of servant leadership, then behaviors are its visible fruit. The values and motivations discussed in the previous section become evident through actions like listening, empathy, humility, integrity, and consistency. These behaviors are not occasional acts; they are ongoing practices that reflect a leader's commitment to placing the needs and development of others at the center of leadership.

Among these behaviors, listening is often identified as one of the most important things a servant leader does. Northouse writes in *Leadership: Theory and Practice* that "Servant leaders demonstrate they care by listening first... to understand the inner voice of others" (Northouse 232). Listening allows leaders to better understand followers' needs, concerns, and aspirations of those they lead. By creating space for others to be heard, servant leaders cultivate trust and establish relationships built on mutual respect. Servant leaders approach communication as an opportunity to understand and support them.

Connected to listening is authenticity. Sendjaya brings awareness to the importance of authenticity by warning of the dangers of a "false self," which is "The incessant necessity to hide who they really are from others... often accompanied by a

strong feeling that others' acceptance and love will dramatically drop if they find out about the things meticulously kept in the hidden closet" (Sendjaya 53) in *Personal and Organizational Excellence through Servant Leadership*. Leaders who operate from a false self become preoccupied with maintaining appearance and seeking approval, which can undermine trust and effectiveness. Authenticity allows leaders to engage with others honestly and transparently. This helps in creating environments where openness and vulnerability are valued.

Trust is key to any type of leadership. As Blanchard writes in *Servant leadership in Action*, "Trust is to servant leadership what profit is to a business" (Blanchard 54). Trust is what leadership is built on and runs on. Without trust, competent leaders struggle to maintain influence and credibility. Servant leaders cultivate trust through honesty, consistency, accountability, and integrity, demonstrating through their action that they are worthy of the confidence followers place in them (Sendjaya 56).

Humility is another defining characteristic of servant leadership. Servant leaders actively encourage and celebrate the talents and successes of others. Sendjaya observes that, "Servant leaders are adept at identifying and affirming followers' strengths and talents rather than feeling threatened by their superior intelligence and talents" (Sendjaya 58). A servant leader should not feel threatened by others' strengths. In humility, a servant leader affirms followers' strengths.

Vision and empowerment also play major roles. Northouse explains that servant leaders “put followers first, empower them, and help them develop their full personal capacities” (Northouse 225–226). The act of empowering others includes delegating tasks; it requires intentionally creating opportunities for growth, responsibility, and development. By trusting others with meaningful work and encouraging them to take ownership of their contributions, servant leaders foster confidence and competence within individuals and organizations.

Raj Sisodia’s SELFLESS framework supports Northouse’s argument, Sisodia writes “Strength, enthusiasm, love, flexibility, long-term orientation, emotional intelligence, systems intelligence, and spiritual intelligence” (Blanchard 45). Sisodia lists these as key behaviors and characteristics that servant leaders portray, and each of these empower and encourage followers. These characteristics enable leaders to create environments where individuals are supported, challenged, and encouraged to reach their full potential. The servant leader’s success is therefore measured by both organizational outcomes and the growth of those they influence.

Consistency further strengthens a leader’s ability to inspire trust and foster development. Servant leadership demands more than occasional demonstrations of care and ethical behavior; it demands a consistent lasting commitment to values across different circumstances. Northouse identifies putting others first as “the sine qua non of servant leadership—the defining characteristic. It means using actions and words that

clearly demonstrate to followers that their concerns are a priority, including placing followers' interests and success ahead of those of the leader" (Northouse 234). When leaders consistently align their actions with their stated values, they establish credibility and reinforce trust.

The practical behaviors and characteristics reveal how servant leadership moves from internal conviction to external practice. Listening, authenticity, humility, empowerment, and consistency are not independent traits, they are interconnected behaviors that reflect a leader's dedication to serving others. Through these practices, servant leaders can cultivate a culture marked with trust, growth, and shared purpose. As a result, servant leadership's effectiveness is shown through the development and well-being of people being led.

Spiritual & Ministry-Centered Models

While servant leadership can be applied well in a variety of organizational settings, it is extremely well fitted for ministry contexts. Many servant leadership scholars recognize that the motivation to serve often goes beyond organizational effectiveness and comes from a deeper sense of purpose, calling, and responsibility. For Christian leaders, this foundation is grounded in a relationship with God and a desire to reflect the character of Christ.

Sendjaya's category of transcendental spirituality illustrates that servant leadership is more than human-centered motivations and is grounded in a higher calling, "Servant leaders are shaped by an inner conviction that something or someone beyond self and the material world exists and makes life complete and meaningful (Sendjaya 92). This expands servant leadership to more than a leadership strategy and presents it as an expression of deeply held beliefs and values. In ministry settings or Christian leaders, this translates to seeing leadership as stewardship and service aligned with God's will.

The life and ministry of Jesus Christ was the ultimate example of servant leadership. Jesus consistently demonstrated humility, sacrificial love, and service to others. In *Biblical Servant Leadership: An Exploration of Leadership for the Contemporary Context*, Steven Crowther identifies Jesus as the ultimate servant leader, noting that His teachings and actions consistently demonstrated humility, sacrifice, and love (Crowther 136). Jesus not only taught principles of servant leadership but embodied them throughout His ministry.

Jesus' demonstrating and teaching of servant leadership is particularly evident in passages such as Mark 10, where Jesus declares that the Son of Man came "not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45) and John 13, where He washed the feet of His disciples. Jesus humbled Himself by washing His disciples' feet, showing that leadership involves willingly stepping out of the expectations from one's position in order to serve

others. Both examples challenge traditional assumptions about leadership by redefining greatness through service. Jesus willingly set aside privilege and position in order to meet the needs of others, showing that effective leadership is done in humility and selfless love.

Crowther explains that “Love is paramount in servant leadership along with the other virtues of servant leadership like humility, altruism, trust, empowering others, and service to others” (Crowther 136). These virtues form a solid foundation of ministry leadership because they reflect the character of Christ and provide a model for how Christian leaders should interact with those they serve. Leadership in ministry should reach beyond accomplishing organizational goals.

Gene Wilkes further develops this understanding through his study of Jesus’ leadership practices. In *Jesus on Leadership*, Wilkes identifies principles such as humility, servanthood, shared responsibility, and sacrificial love as central to effective leadership, and all principles Jesus lived out (Wilkes 11-12). These principles challenge leadership models that rely on authority or control by instead relying on gaining influence through character and service. As Wilkes writes, leaders “earn the right to lead through consistent character and sacrificial love” (Wilkes 52). Trust and credibility are developed through a sustained character and commitment to serve others that comes from God.

The shepherd model, as proposed by Culhane, is a useful framework for understanding ministry servant leadership. By emphasizing provision, protection, and

presence) the shepherd model highlights the relational responsibilities of leadership (Blanchard 87). Ministry leaders are called to walk alongside others, offering guidance, encouragement, and care. This approach reflects the relational shepherd nature of Christ's ministry and reinforces the importance of personal investment in the lives of followers.

Servant leadership also offers a valuable response to challenges often found in ministry settings, including burnout, pride, and hierarchical leadership structures. Because servant leadership emphasizes humility, stewardship, and care for others, it provides a framework that helps leaders resist the temptation to pursue recognition, power, or personal success. Simeon Sinek's reminder in *Servant Leadership in Action* that "leadership... is about taking care of those in your charge" (Blanchard 98) connects with ministry, where leaders are responsible for spiritual formation and stability.

Ministry-centered models of servant leadership build upon the broader servant leadership literature while grounding leadership in a Christian understanding of service, stewardship, and discipleship. Through humility, sacrificial love, stewardship, and relational care, servant leadership is a leadership that aligns with Christian discipleship. Rather than viewing leadership as the exercise of authority, these models present leadership as an opportunity to serve others and Christ Jesus faithfully and reflect the character of Christ in every day.

Critiques

Despite its appeal and growing influence, servant leadership has faced several criticisms. Critics question its conceptual clarity, practical effectiveness, and applicability across different organizational contexts. While many of the critiques do not invalidate servant leadership, they highlight important challenges that must be considered when evaluating its strengths and limitations.

One of the most common critiques is the definition of servant leadership itself. Because servant leadership incorporates a wide range of characteristics, including humility, empathy, stewardship, authenticity, and empowerment, some scholars argue that the concept is contradictory. Northouse notes, the term servant leadership can sound confusing and even counterproductive in settings that prioritize efficiency, hierarchy, or rapid decision making, “Because the name appears contradictory, servant leadership is prone to be perceived as fanciful or whimsical. In addition, being a servant leader implies following, and following is viewed as the opposite of leading” (Northouse 240–241). This critique reveals a deeper tension that some organizational cultures interpret service as weakness, softness, or passivity, making servant leadership impractical.

Sen Sendjaya responds to these concerns by insisting that the tension between servanthood and leadership is a key insight for understanding the model correctly. He argues that servant leadership is not passive but ethically courageous, requiring a level

of maturity and self-denial uncommon in many leadership structures. He writes “The curious juxtaposition between servanthood and leadership is not a semantics issue. It serves to highlight a profound understanding of what it really means to lead” (Sendjaya 2). The reframing shows that servant leaders do not abandon authority; they steward it. Leadership becomes an exercise in responsible influence, not dominance. Sendjaya clarifies further by suggesting a shift in terminology that captures the true meaning, “Leadership is often considered the operative word, and servant is the qualifier. But... a more fitting phrase then is not *servant leaders* but *leading servants*” (Sendjaya 42). This clarification strengthens the argument that servant leadership is not contradictory. Instead, it describes leaders who lead by serving. And serving does not imply a weakness or following.

Critiques of servant leadership reveal that no leadership theory is without limitations. The continued growth of research and practice surrounding this leadership model suggests that its emphasis on service, responsibility, and development of others remains highly relevant and useful. By acknowledging its strengths and weaknesses, leaders can apply servant leadership more thoughtfully and effectively across many contexts.

Conclusion

The literature on servant leadership presents a leadership model that is distinct from approaches centered on authority, status, or personal achievement. Across the various definitions, theories, and applications examined, a consistent theme emerges; effective leadership begins with a commitment to serve others. Whether discussed through Greenleaf's concept of servant-first leader, Hunter's emphasis on character, Northouse's focus on follower development, or Sendjaya's holistic framework; servant leadership is consistently portrayed as a relational and ethical approach to influence.

The books demonstrate that servant leadership starts in identity and motivation before it is formed in character and behavior. Leadership emerges from a commitment to the follower and done so from a place of humility, stewardship, and care for others, which is then reflected through practices like listening, authenticity, empowerment, and building trust. Instead of viewing leadership as the exercise of power, servant leadership frames influence as a responsibility to support the growth and well-being of those being led. This emphasis on service provides a model that can be applied across organizational and ministry contexts.

Ministry-centered models of servant leadership build on these principles by grounding leadership in Christ and His example, emphasizing stewardship and sacrificial love. At the same time, critiques of servant leadership point to important questions regarding clarity, authority, and effectiveness. While these critiques highlight limitations

and challenges, they also contribute to a more balanced understanding of the theory and encourage thoughtful application of servant leadership.

Taken together, the literature suggests that servant leadership is best understood not simply as a leadership style but as a comprehensive approach to leadership and life that integrates character, relationships, and service. This provides the foundation for examining how servant leadership has shaped my own experiences, influenced my understanding of leadership, and informed my approach to future leadership.

Personal Reflection: Servant Leadership for Various Contexts

Some of my earliest experiences in leadership came through serving in Sunday school and youth group. While being in these roles helped develop my leadership skills, they also stirred internal conflict. I struggled to believe that someone with my personality, a quiet observant, and introverted person, could effectively lead. I associated leadership with confidence, charisma, and the ability to command attention. Because I was none of these things, I often assumed I was unqualified to lead before I even began.

Over time, servant leadership challenged those assumptions. As James C. Hunter writes “Personality has little to do with leadership because leadership is not about style. Rather, leadership is about substance. Personality deals with style while character deals with substance” (Hunter 143). This perspective helped me recognize that leadership is not determined by personality but by a willingness to serve others. Instead of asking myself whether I was outgoing enough to lead, I began asking whether I was willing to invest in others. What I once viewed as weaknesses became strengths that allowed me to lead in a way that was authentic who I am.

My first significant opportunity to practice leadership in a structured setting came when I served as a camp counselor at Camp of the Risen Son. There I began to understand the shepherding nature of leadership. Blanchard describes this in *Servant*

Leadership in Action as a leader's responsibility to be present, attentive, and protective of those in their care (Blanchard 87). At camp my role was more than managing behavior. One girl in my cabin seemed reluctant to participate in almost any activity. She seemed to approach everything half-heartedly and often appeared withdrawn from the rest of the group. There was a lot going on in her life, and she was struggling. Rather than trying to insert myself into all of her problems, I sat with her and listened. Through our conversations, I learned that she loved dance. So, for the talent show, she got involved by helping one of her cabinmates by giving her choreography. For the first time that week, she looked so joyful and engaged, using a gift she loved in a place where she felt safe and supported. During moments of conflict or worry I learned to remain calm and grounded. Offering stability and reassurance rather than rash reactions. These situations required me to practice emotional steadiness and patience. These were quiet expressions of leadership, not charisma. I learned from this experience that leadership effectiveness cannot be measured by outcomes alone. Looking back, that moment taught me that leadership is not always about fixing problems immediately; it is often about being present for someone who needs support and love.

As I look back at my time as a counselor, I also learned some things from my mistakes. One of the foundational aspects of servant leadership is humility, but I struggled with pride and comparison. Many of the other counselors seemed naturally outgoing, energetic, and confident. Because of this, I assumed they were better leaders

than I was and that I did not belong there. This preoccupation with myself at times pulled me away from being genuine with my campers and truly listening to their needs and wants. By being concerned with myself and my own wants to be one of the “cool counselors” I ended up not developing as sincere relationships with the girls in my cabin. Without those sincere relationships I was not able to serve them as effectively as I could have.

This experience taught me that servant leadership is not only about but also about motives. My struggle of comparing myself with other counselors distracted me from the people I had been entrusted to lead by serving. Instead of valuing my campers, I was valuing how I was being perceived by others. This realization challenged me to ground my leadership in Christ instead of the approval of others. It reminded me that effective service requires selfless attention to others rather than preoccupation with self.

An extremely formative leadership experience that I am still involved in today is with Campus Ambassadors (WOU Fellowship at Western Oregon University). This club/organization introduced me to a way of leadership that was rooted in genuine care and faith. The leaders modeled servant leadership through their actions and attitudes. I vividly remember how a couple of the leaders set aside time to meet with me one-on-one. They wanted to get to know me and learn the best way to support me. Every time I

would enter the room or see a member of Campus Ambassadors they would say my name with such enthusiasm and excitement.

I began a one-on-one mentorship with one of the leaders at the club, and she was persistent, consistent, and kind even through my quiet stubbornness. In one of my first meetings with my mentor, she took me to the disc golf course on campus. It was in the fall, so the wind was a bit cold, the ground was wet, and we walked to the back of the field where we proceeded to scream at the trees. My mentor had observed and listened to me, she knew my fears of speaking up, and she helped me to become more comfortable using my voice. Through mentorship and constant interaction with leaders I slowly began to open up and become excited by the opportunity to serve others around me.

That simple act of being heard and seen communicated that they valued me. It embodied what Northouse identifies as one of the essential behaviors of servant leadership, “Servant leaders demonstrate they care by listening first... to understand the inner voice of others” (Northouse 232). From first observing leaders of Campus Ambassadors and then becoming one, I found that leadership and influence are built through trust and relational investment, not position or performance. Leadership became less about impressing people and more about consistently showing care for them. In my sophomore year of college, there was a girl who was new to the Christian faith. I began discipling her, taking her through a guide on the basics of Christianity. In

meeting with her, I began to realize truly how special it is to serve someone in the capacity of leadership. I got to witness the tremendous joy this girl found in Christ and the continued joy every time she would learn something new. I got the privilege to help her grow and address the many misconceptions she had grown up with about what being a follower of Christ meant.

These experiences reinforced lessons I already had begun learning about servant leadership, specifically the importance of listening, presence, and relational investment. Over time, I came to realize that effective leadership is more about a consistent willingness to understand and care for others than it is about personality, visibility, or recognition.

At the same time, my journey in leadership has revealed my struggles. Pride and comparison are not challenges that disappear overnight. They require continual work and attention. Servant leadership involves a high level of self-awareness. I have learned that I have to routinely examine my motive and underlying thoughts. I must constantly ask myself whether I am acting out of a desire to serve God and others or a desire to please people and elevate myself.

Within the last month of winter term, I have been in the process of examining myself and my motives. I had the opportunity to join staff with Campus Ambassadors or to continue into the career I went to college for. While serving with Campus Ambassadors was a wonderful opportunity, I had to look at my motives for staying or

leaving. As I considered the decision, I had to continually examine my motives, that the decision could not be made solely on the basis of wanting the other leaders to like me more because of staying on the team. If I stayed, it needed to be because I genuinely wanted to serve students. This was difficult because of my struggle with wanting others' approval, needing to please them. I also love the ministry. I loved participating in God's beautiful plan for people and witnessing the miraculous ways He works in people's lives. And while I love the college ministry, it is not where I am called to be at the time. I felt through prayer that it was time to move on into a career, accounting. Serving with Campus Ambassadors was a wonderful formative time that taught me so much about what it means to lead and love, and now it's time to apply that to my career in the accounting field. Although accounting may appear quite different from ministry, this decision helped me realize that servant leadership is not tied to a specific vocation. The principles of humility, stewardship, integrity, and service can be practiced in professional environments just as meaningfully as they can in ministry.

Another area of growth has been consistency, especially with my family. Leadership in my family context has been one of the longest experiences in my life. Since my younger sibling was born, I have had opportunities to lead through example. I helped with homework, listened to their concerns, and was a safe person they could confide in. The family context has served as a training ground for leadership, where influence is earned through consistency and care. This aligns with Gene C. Wilkes'

statement that “You earn the right to lead through consistent character and sacrificial love” (Wilkes 52). In my family, my influence did not come from authority, it came from being present and dependable.

In this setting, I have probably made the most mistakes and also learned from them. Family members are often the people with whom I feel the most comfortable. This is a pro and con from a leadership point of view. There is the most trust and care for my younger siblings, but they are also the easiest people to end up hurting and pushing aside for self-interests. My role as the oldest sister has revealed how difficult it can be to consistently practice servant leadership. It can often be easier to be patient, intentional, and attentive in structured leadership roles than it is in everyday interactions with people closest to me. It is my natural instinct with my younger sisters to snap at them when frustrated or tired, to ignore them when what they are saying feels unimportant, but as I have learned from experience and reading, the most loving thing to do is to put aside my selfish desires. To be the leader that loves them and wants what is best for them.

This inconsistency of servant-like leadership in my life in different contexts has shown me that servant leadership must extend beyond formal leadership roles. If servant leadership is truly rooted in identity, then it should shape how I interact with all people. My familial relationships have challenged me to grow in patience, humility, and selflessness in a more consistent and authentic way.

From a theological perspective, these experiences have also deepened my understanding of what it means to live like Christ and to abide in Him. Jesus demonstrated servant leadership through humility, presence, and sacrificial love. He invested in individuals, often in quiet and personal ways, and prioritized people over status and recognition. Reflecting on His example challenges me to examine not only my actions but my heart. Servant leadership, in this sense, is not merely a model to follow, but a calling to reflect Christ's character in the way I lead others.

Reflecting on all of these experiences, I can identify several of my strengths that align with servant leadership. Several strengths that align with servant leadership have come from these experiences, including empathy, listening, humility, and a desire for moral clarity. As Northouse explains, "Empathy allows servant leaders to see the world from others' points of view, and awareness sharpens their ability to respond appropriately" (Northouse 235). My strengths allow me to connect with others and respond to their hurts and needs carefully and empathetically.

However, I also recognize areas where I need to grow. One area where I can continue to grow is conflict navigation. I tend to avoid conflict in an attempt to keep the peace, but servant leadership requires more than conflict avoidance. It requires the courage to address difficult issues in ways that promote truth, reconciliation, and healthy relationships. Being a good conflict navigator connects with another area I can grow in, using my voice in group settings. While listening is one of my strengths, there

are times when leadership calls for me to speak up with clarity and confidence. Learning to balance listening with using my voice is an important step in my development.

Additionally, I have struggled with presenting a “false self,” especially in instances where I am concerned about how others perceive me. As Sendjaya describes, the false self is “the incessant necessity to hide who they really are from others. Often it is accompanied by a strong feeling that others’ acceptance and love will dramatically drop if they find out about the things meticulously kept in the hidden closet” (Sendjaya 53). I can tend to lean toward the thought process that if people see my flaws, if they see that I am less than perfect, then they will judge me. In reality, I have found that authenticity often strengthens relationships because people connect more readily with honesty than perfection. In many cases, personal weaknesses and struggles can become opportunities to encourage through honesty and vulnerability.

This tendency of thought and action of “false self” leads to people-pleasing behaviors and comparison that are inconsistent with authentic servant leaders. True servant leadership requires authenticity, which Sendjaya says includes “humility, integrity, accountability, security, and vulnerability” (Sendjaya 56). In particular, humility plays a crucial role in how I relate to others. Sendjaya notes that “servant leaders are adept at identifying and affirming followers’ strengths and talents rather than feeling threatened by their superior intelligence and talents” (Sendjaya 58). This challenges me to shift my focus away from comparison and toward encouraging others. Rather than

viewing others' strengths as competition, I can learn to see them as opportunities to affirm and build them up.

One practical tool that I found helpful from the literature on servant leadership is Blanchard's questions "Am I willing at this time to make the investment required to make a positive difference on this topic?" (Blanchard 106). This question forced me to examine my motives and intentions as a leader. I have found myself returning to this question when facing feelings of comparison, criticism, or difficult decisions. In those moments, it helps redirect my attention away from myself and back toward the people I am called to serve. As Blanchard explains, it creates "a split-second delay in our potentially prideful, cynical, judgmental, argumentative, and selfish responses to our environment" (Blanchard 110). This intentional pause helps me respond with greater humility and care, aligning my thoughts and actions with my identity in Christ and the servant leader I have been called to be.

These experiences have significantly shaped both my understanding of leadership and my development as a person. Through serving in youth ministry, summer camp, Campus Ambassadors, and my relationships with family and friends, I have learned that leadership is less about influence, recognition, or position, and more about faithfully serving others in selfless love. Many of the assumptions I once held about leadership have been challenged by a deeper understanding and closeness to Christ's humility, authenticity, stewardship, and relational investment.

At the same time, this journey has revealed areas where I need the most continued growth and improvement. Servant leadership is not a destination that can be fully achieved, it is an ongoing lifelong process of learning to place the needs of others above personal ambition, comparison, and desire for approval. It requires reflection, intentionality, and complete dependence on God. While I have not mastered these, I have come to recognize that leadership is most effective when it flows from a genuine desire to serve rather than a desire to be recognized.

Servant leadership has provided a framework that not only explains leadership differently but has helped transform how I approach it. I have gone from asking myself how I can become a more influential leader to asking myself how I can better serve the people around me, and especially those under my care. This shift in perspective has shaped the way I view ministry, relationships, and future professional opportunities, and it will continue to influence the kind of leader I hope to become.

Future Application: Servant Leadership for Various Contexts

Looking into the future, I intend to apply servant leadership intentionally in both ministry and professional contexts. While these environments differ in structure, expectations, and goals, the foundational principles of servant leadership remain consistent. My desire is not to apply servant leadership not only in specific situations but to allow it to shape my identity, influencing how I lead, interact with others, and make decisions throughout my life. This commitment comes from my experiences, informed by the literature, and directed by a desire to serve others faithfully while reflecting Christ's character. Leadership, in this sense, becomes less about achieving personal success and more about faithfully stewarding the influences and opportunities I have been given.

Ministry Vision

Although I will not be continuing with Campus Ambassadors as a staff member, I know that ministry will continue to be an important part of my life. While I am uncertain what specific opportunities will come, I am committed to remaining involved in ministry, whether that is serving in my local church, mentoring others, or creating opportunities for spiritual growth in my workplace and community.

In ministry contexts, my primary goal is to continue mentoring and discipling others. My own growth has been deeply shaped by leaders who did the same for me, so I desire to continue the cycle. As I move out of campus ministry, my focus will be less on leading groups and organizing events and more on one-on-one relational discipleship. And part of doing this is helping others develop to also lead and serve. Gene C. Wilkes writes, “Jesus built leaders, not just followers. He served by equipping others to serve (Wilkes 73). This perspective will play a significant role in how I approach leadership within ministry contexts. Leadership is not about gathering followers or maintaining control, it is about equipping others, so leadership is multiplied. This multiplication of leadership reflects a different understanding of success, not in the number of followers a leader gathers, but in the number of people equipped to serve and lead others.

Because of this, I aim to create environments where leadership is shared. In many ministry settings, leaders can feel pressure to maintain control in order to ensure quality. However, this approach can limit the growth of others. How can others grow if they are not given the opportunities to lead and fail? Servant leadership challenges this mindset of control by emphasizing trust. Trusting others to step into responsibility, even when they are still learning, and will make mistakes, creates opportunities for growth that might not have happened otherwise. This vision is modeled clearly in the life of Jesus. In Mark 6:7, Jesus sent out His disciples two by two, entrusting them with authority and responsibility. This moment is significant because it demonstrates a

willingness to release control to help others grow and develop. As Wilkes explains, “Jesus gave away power. He entrusted others with the mission” (Wilkes 88). This example challenges me to lead with open hands, recognizing that leadership is strengthened when shared.

In practice, this vision will take shape through intentional mentorship and small-group leadership. This will look like investing in individuals through meaningful and intentional one-on-one relationships. I will take time to understand their strengths, struggles, passions, and calling. This kind of investment will require patience and intentionality, but it can create a deeper, more lasting impact. Instead of focusing on broad influence, I plan to prioritize depth of relationship and growth.

In addition to developing leadership skills, I plan to focus on long-term spiritual development. In many ministry contexts success is often measured by numbers or visible outcomes. While metrics like these can be helpful, they can also shift the focus away from deeper transformation. Servant leadership calls for a different perspective; one that values spiritual maturity, faithfulness, and consistency over immediate results.

This means being patient with the process of growth, recognizing that transformation happens slowly. It also means valuing individuals for who they are, not just what they can contribute. As Sendjaya reminds, “People are not human resources, but human beings” (Sendjaya 98). This truth is especially important in ministry, where it can be easy to unintentionally treat as projects to fix rather than individuals to love and

serve. So in ministry, the environment I wish to help create is one where individuals feel known, valued, and cared for. This includes fostering spaces where people experience peace, encouragement, and authenticity. It means being attentive to what people want to do and how they are doing emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Servant leadership in ministry is about reflecting Christ's love and sharing His love with others so they might come to know Him personally.

Another aspect of my ministry vision is modeling leadership. Jesus did not simply instruct His disciples, He demonstrated ministry and leadership for them through His actions. In the same way, the way I live should help shape others in understanding leadership and what it means to be a follower of Christ. This requires consistency between my values and my behavior. It also requires humility, recognizing that leadership is not about perfection, but about faithfully reflecting Christ. Through both my strengths and weaknesses, I hope to model what it looks to live and lead as a follower of Christ.

Professional Application in Accounting

In my professional career in accounting, servant leadership will shape how I approach my responsibilities and relationships within the organization. While accounting is often viewed as a numbers-driven and compliance focused field, I have learned that ethical decision-making, communication, and trust are equally important

for long-term success. Servant leadership provides a great framework for having both technical excellence and relational responsibility.

One of the most important applications of servant leadership in accounting is integrity. Accountants have a significant level of responsibility in ensuring that financial statements accurately reflect an organization's financial position. From a servant leadership perspective, this responsibility extends beyond mere compliance; it reflects a commitment to serve stakeholders; employees, investors, and the public; by providing truthful and transparent information. Acting with integrity becomes a form of service that protects others from harm and supports ethical decision making across the organization.

Servant leadership also applies to teamwork and collaboration within accounting firms. Many accounting tasks require coordination of deadlines and people. In these environments, I see the importance of prioritizing listening, patience, and support for colleagues, especially during high pressure seasons like tax season or year-end reporting. Instead of focusing only on efficiency and personal performance, servant leadership encourages me to ask how I can contribute to the success and well-being of my team.

How I approach leadership opportunities in the future in the accounting field will be influenced by servant leadership. Rather than viewing leadership as authority over others, I will view it as responsibility for others' growth and development. This includes

providing constructive feedback, offering mentorship, and creating an environment where questions are welcomed. As Northouse explains, servant leaders want to “develop the full personal capacities” of followers (Northouse 225-226), which in my professional setting translates to investing in the growth of future accountants. At the same time, I must remain committed to my own growth and development. So, as I invest in others' growth, I should also be seeking opportunities to gain experience from my superiors and those I am investing in.

Servant leadership will guide me in how I balance productivity with being personable in the workplace. Accounting is often deadline-driven and stressful, which can lead to burnout and an overly task-oriented mindset. A servant leadership approach encourages attentiveness to people’s well-being paired with performance expectations. This means recognizing when colleagues are overwhelmed, encouraging sustainable work habits, and contributing to a culture where people feel valued for more than just their output.

Being a servant leader in accounting allows me to integrate ethical responsibility, relational care, and professional competence. It reframes success into terms of more than just accuracy and efficiency, or career advancement. Success also includes building trust, serving others with integrity, and positively influencing the people and organizations affected by my work. Whether serving clients, supporting coworkers, or contributing to organizational decision making, I hope to approach my profession with

the same commitment to humility, stewardship, and service that has shaped my understanding of leadership in ministry. In this way, servant leadership provides a way of life that unifies both my professional aspirations and my desire to faithfully serve Jesus by also serving others.

Conclusion: Servant Leadership in Action: Identity, Practice, and Application Across Ministry and Professional Contexts

Servant leadership emerges from both the literature and my personal experience as a model grounded in identity and expressed through behavior and sustained by intentional practice. Rather than functioning as a leadership style based on personality or position, it is rooted in the decision to serve others first. This foundation shapes how leaders think, act, and influence those around them across both ministry and professional contexts.

The literature consistently emphasizes that servant leadership is not passive, but active and proactive in nature. It requires humility, ethical responsibility, and a commitment to the growth and well-being of others. Together, Greenleaf's foundational work, Northouse's practical application, Sendjaya's emphasis on character, and the applied examples of Blanchard and others demonstrate that servant leadership is both conceptually strong and practically viable. Across these perspectives, a consistent truth emerges -- that leadership is most effective when it values people and their development.

My personal experiences have confirmed and deepened this understanding. Through youth ministry, Camp of the Risen Son, and Campus Ambassadors, and family relationships, I have observed both the strengths and struggles of attempting to lead from a servant-hearted perspective. These experiences have revealed that servant

leadership is not a fixed trait, but an ongoing process involving the combination of identity, motivation, and action, continually shaped through real-life practice.

Looking forward, I hope to carry this holistic framework into both ministry and professional environments, including my future career in accounting. In each context, servant leadership will shape how I treat people, how I make decisions, and how I define success. Servant leadership integrates faith, work, and leadership into a consistent, whole way of living instead of living in separate categories.

Jesus, His example of servant leadership, and His call for His disciples to live in the same way, challenge me to lead in a way that reflects humility, integrity, and care for others. It calls me to influence not through the need to be authoritative or to be recognized, but through service that seeks the good of those I am responsible for. As I continue to grow, my aim is not only to understand servant leadership more deeply, but also to consistently live servant leadership out in every context I am placed.

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