Chapter 6

Servant Leadership ᠗

Burcu Turan Torun[1]

Abstract

Servant leadership, which is an important leadership approach today, is an approach that prioritizes the expectations of employees. Thanks to this approach, business managers can increase the job satisfaction levels of their employees. They can increase their performance levels. They can increase their commitment to the organization. Thus, they have the opportunity to achieve their goals more easily. This understanding, which has such important effects on achieving goals, is discussed in this study, and firstly, servant leadership understanding is tried to be explained. Then, the importance of this understanding is mentioned, and the characteristics of servant leadership and the advantages and disadvantages of this understanding are explained.

1. Introduction

Leadership is an indispensable factor for the success of businesses. Due to the difficulty of achieving success in today's conditions and the number of factors affecting success, as well as the need to change the behavior of human beings in different ways, many leadership models have emerged. One of these leadership approaches is the servant leadership approach that has been recognized today.

As of 1990, the interest of researchers in this understanding has increased, and it has been seen in the research that managers determine the change in the attitudes and behaviors of employees by engaging in servant leadership behaviors (Nal et al., 2020: 843). Servant leadership was mainly based on Greenleaf's studies (Yılmaz & Ceylan, 2016:76). Greenleaf, who introduced this concept, explains it as "The servant leader is a servant first, starting with a natural feeling of wanting to serve, and then a conscious choice leads the person to lead" (Greenleaf, 1977). It can be said that the servant leadership

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1   Assoc. Prof. Dr., Van Yuzuncu Yil University, burcuturan@yyu.edu.tr,
     ORCID:0000-0003-1963-9368

approach is an understanding that involves the leader replacing his/her own interests with their interests in order to ensure the development and happiness of the employees gathered under one roof in order to realize the goals of the organization. Therefore, there is an understanding in which leaders focus on their employees and put them at the center.

Today, servant leadership is an important understanding for employees because this understanding sees employees as valuable and includes them in decisions. Servant leaders who prioritize and strive to serve others and work for the welfare and happiness of employees are individuals who prioritize knowledge and people, are visionary, honest, sincere, compassionate, want the development of their employees, and are successful by exhibiting behaviors in this context.

Thanks to this approach that prioritizes employees and takes their expectations into consideration, managers can achieve their goals more easily because the understanding of serving employees first will increase the motivation of employees, they will be able to reveal more than the expected performance level, and exhibit organizational citizenship behavior for their businesses. In today's fiercely competitive environment, this leadership approach, which increases the chances of success in an environment where success is becoming more difficult to achieve, is considered important. Due to this importance, this leadership approach is discussed. The study aims to contribute to the literature by discussing the definition, importance, characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages of servant leadership.

2. The Concept of Servant Leadership

Servant leadership emerged when Greenleaf read Herman Hesse's (1956) novel Journey to the East and published the article "Servant Leader" in 1970 and then published the book Servant Leadership in 1977 (Fındıkçı, 2009 cited in Taktak & Bilgivar, 2022: 5). Servant leadership, one of the current leadership approaches, is based on the understanding of serving others (Başar & Gültekin, 2022: 1287).

Servant leadership, which has gained importance among leadership approaches and has been the subject of different studies, is an approach that includes attitudes and behaviors according to the leader's attitude and behaviors by thinking about the employees rather than the leader himself (Özkan, 2019: 3158). The leader devotes himself to the needs of his employees without considering his own interests (Başar & Gültekin, 2022: 1288). In other words, servant leadership is a follower-oriented leadership approach that emerges by prioritizing the individual needs and interests of

followers and addressing their concerns (Eva et al., 2021:43). There is no agreed-upon definition and theoretical framework for servant leadership. Scholars have interpreted servant leadership differently and have revealed its various dimensions (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012:556).

Greenleaf explained servant leadership as "the behavior of the servant leader starts with the natural feelings of the individual and consciously continues these feelings and transforms them into servant leadership" and then defined the servant leader as an individual who is willing to serve rather than being a guide (Nal et al., 2020:844).

According to Greenleaf (1998), servant leadership is a unique, democratic, and participative type of leadership. It claims that the main purpose of the leader's passion, motivation, and duty is to serve (Yurdakul & Kosa, 2023:1102). This understanding focuses on making employees competent in their duties, serving the society, ensuring self-motivation, and developing the leadership skills of employees (Bolat et al., 2016:78). Thanks to this understanding, employees can contribute to both their organizations and society in a stronger way.

Sendjaya and Cooper, on the other hand, defined servant leadership as a whole and multidimensional leadership approach that includes the rational, relational, ethical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of leaders and followers (Görmezoğlu Gökçen, 2019:10). According to Patterson (2003), servant leadership is similar to transformational leadership. He defined servant leadership as a leader who focuses on followers and puts them first. According to him, a servant leader is a person who is humble, selfless, loving, visionary, reliable, empowering, and serving his/her followers (Okan, 2021:210). Servant leadership is an understanding that requires serving employees, taking their needs into consideration, and creating an environment that will ensure success (Kahveci & Aybay, 2012:20).

Servant leadership refers to an understanding that has emerged with the change and transformation in today's understanding of leadership. In contrast to the understanding of leadership that prioritizes its own interests, it is an understanding of leadership that directly serves its followers and has become a lifestyle, guiding them (Sarı et al., 2024:63), expresses a sacrificial leadership model that enables change at personal and organizational levels and the development of research cultures (Aslan, 2020:199).

Servant leadership combines characteristics such as total quality, teamwork, service orientation, and participative leadership, which prioritizes the interests of followers, involves followers in decision-making processes,

is people-oriented, and therefore enables employees to treat customers in a people-oriented manner (Baykal et al., 2018:113). Since servant leadership is a follower-centered leadership approach, it has a great potential to help the socialization process of new employees (Bauer et al., 2019:357). In this way, employees can adapt to their organizations faster and take ownership of their work.

In order to successfully implement servant leadership, the structure of the organization must be appropriate. Hierarchy and prioritizing the needs of employees may not be suitable for this understanding. For this reason, managers need to establish organizational structures that can ensure the implementation of servant leadership (Cinnioğlu & Saçlı, 2019:1770). Engaging in servant leadership attitudes and behaviors within a suitable organizational structure will make it easier to achieve success.

3. The Importance of Servant Leadership

In today's world, there is a great need for human and moral qualities, and there is a great need for leaders who can conquer hearts without using force or showing an authoritarian management approach. These leaders are expected to be talented and to do things that will benefit their people. At this point, servant leadership appears as a type of leadership that can meet these expectations (Okan, 2021:209).

This approach, expressed by Greenleaf, has important features such as "employee empowerment and development, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, direction, and responsible management". Greenleaf emphasized that this approach aims to meet the expectations of employees and brings positive results to the business in the long term (Özkan, 2019; Elkırmış, 2024). He portrays servant leaders as people who adopt ethical principles and show a deep commitment to putting the needs of their followers at the center of their efforts before their own needs, creating an environment where each follower feels important, committed, and empowered to do and create more. Servant leaders are defined as those who communicate one-on-one with their followers to understand their abilities, needs, goals, and desires (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018: 335).

Servant leaders are listeners, communicators, and problem solvers. He or she empathizes with team members, removes barriers, and creates a positive and inclusive work environment where everyone feels valued and motivated (Claroa & Silva, 2025:1675).

The basis of this leadership model is that the leader considers the interests of the employees before his/her own interests. Although it is also

important in other leadership models to consider the employees and meet their expectations, no leadership approach has prioritized this idea as much as servant leadership. When considered from this perspective, the main difference between the servant leadership approach and other leadership approaches is that the goals of the employees come before the goals of the organization. Therefore, it can be stated that the servant leadership approach puts people more at the center (Bolat et al., 2016:77).

It can be stated that servant leadership will contribute positively to the happiness of employees by encouraging them to take responsibility and reveal their potential, the leader putting himself in the background when the goals are achieved, creating awareness of acting together, being open to criticism and making employees feel valued, exhibiting ethical behaviors, being humble and sincere towards employees and having the ability to persuade instead of being authoritarian (Altınkaya & Selvitopu, 2024:105). It can be said that employees can show a desired level of performance thanks to the contribution to happiness.

Hamilton (2008) stated that a servant leader can have positive contributions such as "task and value orientation, creativity and innovation, responsibility and flexibility, internal and external commitment to work, respect for employees, employee loyalty and tolerance of differences within the organization" (Nal et al., 2020:844). A different feature of servant leadership is the leader's motivation towards others. The motivation is not the status of the leader, but the development of the followers (Zarei et al., 2022:172).

Since leaders' attitudes and behaviors are evaluated by followers as reliable and ethical, an environment of trust is created (Ertan & Yalçın, 2023:3). When followers encounter servant leadership behaviors, a servant leadership culture develops. Thus, in return for this value given to them, they show more effort to achieve the goals of the organization. A servant leader can be explained as a leader who attaches importance to teamwork, makes decisions together with employees, focuses on moral and helpful behaviors, and tries to increase the development of employees as well as the development of the business (Nal et al., 2020:844).

Servant leaders develop followers by caring about their development, empowering them, and showing sensitivity to their personal concerns. Thus, trust between servant leaders and followers grows, and these relationships are strengthened. Followers, in turn, come together in teams with strong levels of trust and psychological safety, which improves team interactions, communication, and knowledge, resulting in smoother functioning and

higher levels of success. These effects benefit the entire organization and lead to improved business performance (Meusera & Smallfield, 2023:252).

In servant leadership, followers know that they are valued. In this way, they want to reciprocate the value given to them by adopting the goals of the business and bringing the business to its goals. Encouraging followers and making them see the business as their own is a problem for leaders to consider. Servant leaders overcome this problem by responding to the expectations of their followers and valuing them.

Servant leaders encourage their followers to be frank and open, allowing for a greater exchange of ideas and experiences (Rai & Prakash, 2016:125). Servant leaders exhibit consistent behavior. They keep their promises, give people a sense of trust, and do not manipulate information. They give importance to the common interests of employees. This makes employees more diligent to achieve their goals (Baykal et al., 2018:114). These leaders go beyond themselves and their employees by considering the interests of customers and society (Neuber et al., 2016:897).

The priority of the servant leader is to serve and to operate in the way of spreading service to employees and institutions (Örgev & Saba Sütlü, 2018:48). It can be thought that individuals whose expectations are taken into account and met will contribute more to the organization.

The most important factor that makes servant leadership different from other leadership models is that it is holistic. Servant leadership refers to a holistic leadership approach that includes different dimensions than transformative, ethical, and authentic leadership (Özbezek, 2022:586). Since employees in businesses with servant leadership perception are more satisfied, their performance is high, and their organizational commitment is high, it is seen that it has recently started to be seen as important in organizational and academic terms (Cinnioğlu & Saçlı, 2019:1770) and has started to be addressed in research with different topics.

The most important characteristic of a servant leader is the priority of serving people. People are a value for this leadership approach. The servant leader prioritizes the interests of his/her followers rather than his/her own interests. They aim to offer the best to their followers. Considering that servant leadership is a value-oriented and lifelong journey that puts people at the center, is based on the understanding of serving them (Kıral, 2021:84), it can be said that this understanding is a leadership understanding that is needed today.

Servant leaders apply "service" in every aspect of life. Perhaps most importantly, they instill in their followers self-confidence and the desire to become servant leaders themselves. By transforming followers into servant leaders, a servant leadership culture can be created (Liden et al., 2008:162).

4. Characteristics of Servant Leadership

The leader's interest in employees rather than organizational goals differentiates servant leadership from other leadership approaches (Suçiçeği & Kıral, 2024:154). Spears (1995), taking Greeanleaf's approach into consideration, stated ten characteristics for servant leaders. These are: (1) Listening and healthy communication, (2) Empathy, (3) Healing, (4) Awareness, (5) Persuasion, (6) Conceptualization, (7) Common sense, (8) Stewardship, (9) Focus on the development of the audience, (10) Community building. In their study, Russsel and Stone (2002) identified the characteristics of servant leaders as (1) Vision, (2) Honesty, (3) Integrity, (4) Trust, (5) Service, (6) Forming, (7) Pioneering, (8) Appreciating others, and (9) Empowerment (Öztürk Çiftci, 2022:174, as cited in Kır & Karabulut, 2021:361). Table 1 shows the leadership dimensions of the researchers who contributed to servant leadership.

Table 1. Dimensions of Servant Leadership

Laub (1999)	Russel & Stone (2002)	Patterson (2003)	Dennis & Bocarnea (2005)	Barbuto & Wheeler (2006)	Sendjaya, Sarros & Santora (2008)	Van Dierendonck (2011)
Valuing the audience	Vision	Social and moral love	Retrofit	Sacrifice	Voluntary commitment	Retrofit
Developing audiences	Honesty	Humility	Trust	Emotional healing	Transformative impact	Humility
Community building	Integrity	Sacrifice	Humility	Pairing with persuasion	Authentic personality	Preferring followers
Honesty	Trust	Vision	Like	Wisdom	Responsible morality	Authenticity
Providing leadership	Service	Trust	Vision	Organizational servanthood	Voluntary service	Forgiveness
Sharing leadership	Modeling	Retrofit			Transcendent spirituality	Courage
	Leading the way	Service				Courage Servanthood
	Appreciating others					
	Retrofit					

Source: Baykal et al. (2018:115)

Servant leaders are motivated to serve their employees and equate themselves with their followers. Laub (1999) explained the characteristics of servant leadership as giving trust to employees by building strong relationships, having a visionary perspective, and delegating authority to subordinates. Russell and Stone (2002), while explaining servant leadership characteristics, added the elements of effective communication, trustworthiness, competence, visibility, persuasion, listening, influencing, encouraging, delegating, responsible management, and teaching to Laub's (1999) explanations. Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) added the concept of passion to these characteristics. Spears (2010) explained the characteristics of servant leadership as listening, empathy, awareness, healing, persuasion, conceptualization, visioning, bringing people together, serving, and developing followers (Erdağ & Arslantaş, 2021:792).

5. The Impact of Servant Leaders on Businesses

A servant leader is a leader who can create a vision, develop strategies, motivate and inspire followers, and instill confidence and courage (Şafak et al., 2023:195). Servant leaders think of their followers before themselves and the organization, are not selfish, and make sacrifices for the development of their followers. Employees who see this sacrifice also contribute to the leader and the organization with the same sacrifice.

A servant leader is a person who is dedicated to serving his/her employees. Meeting the needs of society, employees, customers, etc., and responding to their expectations is the primary goal. Leadership comes after this stage (Yılmaz & Ceylan, 2016:76). These leaders do not use force against their followers in order to realize their goals; they make efforts to persuade them. The characteristics of these leaders include listening, empathizing, persuading, imposing management, and actively developing the potential of followers (Alp & Sevim, 2024:184). They care about the least privileged in society and try to help others develop as individuals (Neubert et al., 2008:1222).

According to Greenleaf (1977), a servant leader is a person who can empathize with his/her followers, show good listening skills, and support them. Buchen (1998) defines a servant leader as an individual who trusts people, establishes good relationships, and cares about their expectations. Laub (1999) defines it as an individual who sees employees as valuable and takes action for their development. Russell (2001) defined it as a trusted, serving, empowering, visionary individual. For Spears (2004), a servant leader is a person who serves his/her followers, encourages them

to be diligent, and gives employees the power to make decisions (Okan, 2021:210).

Servant leaders "put themselves in the shoes of employees, listen to them, try to understand them, and these leaders have unusual power and resources to support followers" (Karasakal et al., 2024:485). Servant leaders meet the needs of others and serve them. They enable followers to develop and gain credibility and reputation in return (Ludwikowska & Tworeka, 2022:36).

According to Greenleaf, a leader who works for the benefit of society should endeavor to prevent them from being harmed (Görmezoğlu Gökçen, 2019:7), and an individual who expects service should first serve himself/herself and then manage (Kahveci & Aybay, 2012:20). A servant leader has a desire to serve. This person is definitely different from those who want to gain power or who attach importance to material things. This difference stems from the fact that the servant leader prioritizes the needs of others (Küçük & Yavuz, 2018:82).

Stone and his colleagues defined servant leaders as individuals who put followers' goals before organizational goals, focus on the expectations of their followers, and trust their followers to help the organization achieve its goals (Görmezoğlu Gökçen, 2019:10). Spears (1996) defines a servant leader as someone who engages in teamwork, involves employees in the decision-making process, exhibits ethical behavior, and empowers employees (Küçük & Yavuz, 2018:82). Servant leaders implement their decisions by serving rather than ordering (Sarı et al., 2024:64). Thanks to their service, they try to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage by obtaining positive outputs from employees.

6. Advantages and Disadvantages of Servant Leadership

Researchers have found that servant leadership behavior increases organizational effectiveness in various ways by facilitating job performance, encouraging creativity, and organizational citizenship behaviors of employees (Stollberger et al., Bosch, 2019:158). With the implementation of the servant leadership approach, it has also been evaluated that this approach has some advantages and disadvantages. Table 2 below presents some of the advantages and disadvantages of servant leadership.

Table 2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Servant Leadership

Advantages	Disadvantages
Leaders value their employees and see them as an end, not just a means to an end.	It is similar to the transformative leadership approach.
They support their employees to innovate and develop.	Fail in purpose-based organizations.
They give promises for the future.	They can damage the hierarchical order.
They are always smiling in environments where communication is intense.	It is likely to be perceived as religious and may be alien to modern sensibilities.
Terms of protection and safeguarding are important.	The word "servant" can harm some employees, such as nurses.
They choose facilitation and encouragement instead of power and authority.	The humility shown may be seen as weakness.
They guide and develop their employees and increase their performance.	Some employees may be indifferent to this approach.

Source: Bulut (2025:44).

Servant leaders act by putting the expectations of their followers ahead of their own expectations. As a result of this behavior, leaders do not seek fame, power, or any personal goals. Servant leaders act sensitively by considering how their decisions will affect their followers. This sensitivity comes from within the leaders (Bektaş, 2016:49).

Servant leadership has some disadvantages such as not reflecting the reality in business life, making leaders passive, causing negative thoughts such as considering servanthood as slavery and characterizing leaders as weak (Güler, 2024:24). Being a servant is seen and criticized as contradictory concepts with leadership (Çakadaş, 2024:42). The terms leader and servant are contradictory because they play two different roles at the same time: Serving and leading. As leaders, it can be difficult to accept that they also serve (Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014:388). Another criticism of servant leadership is the lack of organizational structure boundaries that explain the impact of servant leadership behaviors on followers (Eva et al., 2021:43). Therefore, it can be said that it cannot be applied everywhere and may not be efficient.

7. Conclusion

Servant leadership is one of the most important leadership approaches affecting the structure and functioning of organizations today. As a result of

this understanding, leaders put their needs and expectations ahead of their own in order to increase the welfare and happiness of their employees. Thanks to this understanding, leaders achieve positive outputs in the organization.

First of all, employees who are valued start to see their work as their own. Accomplishing a job becomes an obligation for them because it is ingrained in their minds not to be embarrassed and not to frustrate the good intentions of their leaders. They act with the awareness that they need to demonstrate a high level of performance in order to complete their jobs successfully. Organizational identification with their businesses takes place, and they volunteer to do jobs other than their own; in other words, they start to exhibit organizational citizenship attitudes and behaviors.

The servant leadership approach, which is based on persuading employees and involving them in the decisions taken, may have some negative aspects in addition to these positive aspects. Especially if the servant leader exhibits a humble personality, it may be seen as a weakness. In addition, the suitability of the structure of the organization is also important for the success of this leadership approach.

Despite these negativities, the servant leadership approach is important because it emphasizes the issue of valuing people, which is the most needed in today's world conditions, and has centered this as the most important feature. In addition, considering that the most important factor in success is the human element, it can be said that this understanding is an important one suitable for today.

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