



LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT &  
DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Newsletter of the MLQ Network

Volume 7 Issue 3  
November 2005



**EXTRACT - FEATURES ARTICLE**

# Servant Leadership: A Quiet Revolution in the Workplace



**Dr Sen Sendjaya**  
Department of  
Management,  
Monash University.

The first time I heard the phrase 'servant leadership', it sounded like a heresy. I remember asking myself: Can this oxymoronic 'thing' ever be an intellectually compelling and emotionally satisfying theory of leadership with relevance and application to the workplace? This question set me out on an intellectual pursuit in the form of a doctorate study at Monash University <sup>1</sup>.

Forty-six months later, I am prepared to answer the question with a resounding 'yes.'

Of course, we have heard the naysayers who said that servant leadership is synonymous with, or reminds them of, slavery, bondage, absurd altruism in business and so on. But a cursory look at the etymology of servanthood reveals that it carries positive meanings. It does not insinuate a lack of self-respect or low self-image. The humble position voluntarily assumed and the acts of service are wholeheartedly performed for the sake of others. Indeed aspects of the "tall poppy syndrome" in Australian culture reflect a strong desire for this kind of leadership.

## What is Servant Leadership?

Servant leadership is not just another leadership style to adopt when the situation calls for it, or that can be turned on and off at will. It is a commitment of the heart to engage with others in a relationship characterized by a service orientation, a holistic

outlook and a moral-spiritual emphasis. It is an attitude of the heart that shapes the decisions and actions of great leaders at all levels.

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*Profit is to a corporation what oxygen is for the human body; necessary for its existence, but not the reason for it.*

**Peter Drucker**

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When we take stock of our common corporate cultures, we quickly recognize that they are often plagued by toxic emotions, social alienation, corrupt practices and bullying leaders, to name a few. Employee's needs and aspirations are too often sacrificed on the simplistic altar of the bottom line that does not take into account what deeply motivates and inspires people to excellence. We do well to remind ourselves of what **Peter Drucker**, 'the father of modern management' (who recently passed away on the 11th November 2005), once observed: Profit is to a corporation what oxygen is for the human body; necessary for its existence, but not the reason for it. Reversing this trend takes, among others, a fresh leadership framework around which organisations can build positive work environments. Servant leadership could well be part of this quiet revolution.

## Beyond Transformational Leadership

What distinguishes servant leaders from other types of leaders is their deliberate choice to serve others. Servant leaders put other people's needs, aspirations and interests above their own. They make a conscious choice to use their talents in the cause of change and growth for individuals and the organisation <sup>2</sup>.

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## Servant Leadership: A Quiet Revolution in the Workplace continued...

An in-depth review of the extant literature suggests that servant leadership goes beyond current understandings of transformational leadership in several respects. First, servant leaders are more likely than transformational leaders to demonstrate the natural inclination to serve the marginalized and less fortunate people, and not just 'go beyond self interest for the good of the group'. Second, servant leaders have a greater likelihood than transformational leaders to set the priorities in their leadership focus as followers first, organisations second, their own last <sup>3</sup>.

### Empirical Research Support:

#### The Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale (SLBS)

The aim of my doctorate study was to develop and validate a measurement instrument of servant leadership behaviour. It fills a void that has long been subject to anecdotal evidence. For example, *Fortune magazine's* annual survey of "Top 100 Best Companies to Work For in America" reported that the winners advocate the philosophy of servant leadership.

Using rigorous qualitative and quantitative methods and involving over 450 managers and employees in for-profit and not-for-profit organisations in Australia, the study established the preliminary psychometric properties of the SLBS, based on evidence of reliability, content validity, and convergent/discriminant validity.

The outcomes of the study are threefold.

**First**, servant leadership is a multidimensional concept with six empirically distinguishable dimensions:

- *Voluntary Subordination,*
- *Authentic Self,*
- *Covenantal Relationship,*
- *Responsible Morality,*
- *Transcendental Spirituality, and*
- *Transforming Influence* <sup>4</sup>.

*Servant leadership is a multidimensional concept with six empirically distinguishable dimensions.*

**Dr Sen Sendjaya, Monash University, 2005.**

**Second**, the six dimensions of servant leadership can be observed and assessed through a psychometrically valid and reliable measurement instrument - the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale (SLBS).

**Third**, the SLBS has potential application in various organisational settings to inform assessment, selection, training, promotion, and performance evaluation decisions. It is particularly helpful for leadership selection and development purposes. Since servant leadership *behaviours* can be discriminated by respondents, there may be a case for assessing and developing the specific leadership behaviour needs of current employees and in selecting potential employees using SLBS scores in order to develop more socially responsible and ethically-based organisations. These applications are facilitated by the SLBS, being only a 35-item scale which is easy to administer and use.

Currently I am working to establish further the predictive validity of the SLBS by examining the relationship between servant leadership behaviours and other criterion variables such as organisational commitment, trust, job satisfaction, and organisational citizenship behaviour. To this end I would welcome any opportunities to explore potential research collaborations with individuals, groups, or organisations.

**by Dr Sen Sendjaya**

Dr Sen Sendjaya is a Lecturer in the Department of Management, Monash University. His research interests are servant leadership, culture, ethics, management and spiritually, and e-leadership.

Email address maybe available through [info@mlq.com.au](mailto:info@mlq.com.au) if contact with the author is desired.

<sup>1</sup> Sendjaya, S. (2005). Development and validation of the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale. Doctoral Dissertation. Monash University.

<sup>2</sup> Sendjaya, S. and Sarros, J.C. (2002). Servant Leadership: Charting Its Origin, Development, and Application in the Organization. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 9(2), 57-64.

<sup>3</sup> For further details, see: Graham, J. (1991). Servant-leadership in organizations: Inspirational and moral. *Leadership Quarterly*, 2(2): 105-119; Sendjaya, S. (2005). Morality and leadership: Examining the ethics of transformational leadership. *Journal of Academic Ethics*. Online 1, 1-12. ISSN: 1572-8544; Smith, B. N., Montagno, R.

V., & Kuzmenko, T. N. (2004). Transformational and servant leadership: Content and contextual comparisons. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 10(4): 80-92; Stone, A. G., Russel, R. F., & Patterson, K. (2004). Transformational versus servant leadership: A difference in leader focus. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 25(4): 349-361.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief description of the six dimensions, see: Sendjaya, S. (2005). Leading with the heart. *Monash Business Review*. 1(2).