

# A Literature Review of Servant Leadership and Criticism of Advanced Research

So-Jung Kim, Kyoung-Seok Kim, Yeong-Gyeong Choi

**Abstract**—Although there are many theories and discussion of leadership, the necessity of having a new leadership paradigm was emphasized. The existing leadership characteristic of instruction and control revealed its limitations. Market competition becomes fierce and economic recession never ends worldwide. Of the leadership theories, servant leadership was introduced recently and is in line with the environmental changes of the organization. Servant leadership is a combination of two words, 'servant' and 'leader' and can be defined as the role of the leader who focuses on doing voluntary work for others with altruistic ethics, makes members, customers, and local communities a priority, and makes a commitment to satisfying their needs. This leadership received attention as one field of leadership in the late 1990s and secured its legitimacy. This study discusses the existing research trends of leadership, the concept, behavior characteristics, and lower dimensions of servant leadership, compares servant leadership with the existing leadership researches and diagnoses if servant leadership is a useful concept for further leadership researches. Finally, this study criticizes the limitations in the existing researches on servant leadership.

**Keywords**—Leadership Philosophy, Leadership Theory, Servant Leadership, Traditional Leadership.

## I. INTRODUCTION

LEADERSHIP is an important object of study in the field of personnel organization and defined as the process that an individual influences the members of an organization to achieve their common goals. Despite many theories on and discussion of leadership, the necessity of having a new leadership paradigm was emphasized.

Servant leadership received attention quite recently because it had stronger altruistic ethics than the transactional leadership which was based on the transaction relationship that motivated people by making simple exchange or cooperation efforts and had many corporate negative cases or the transformational leadership that leader paid more attention to the motivation and needs of subordinates to help them exert their ability as much as possible. The role of leader who took care of employees and was considerate of them from their perspective has become important.

The existing researches on servant leadership are discussed although the scientific strictness kept by empirical studies in social science is unsatisfied. In particular, the existing researches contain obvious problems in measuring variables,

the most important elements in social science; have not discussed the elements of the concept of servant leadership as fully as possible; and have only conducted the working-level and empirical researches on the outcome of servant leadership.

The study aimed to discuss the existing research trends of leaderships, diagnose if servant leadership is a useful concept for further leadership researches and criticize the limitations in the existing researches on servant leadership.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### A. Flow of Leadership Theory

There were numerous definitions and theories on the concept of leadership and the term leadership has become the most object of study among the topics of behavioral science. There are several representative definitions on leadership. Bass [2] defined the recognition and expectation of a situation among group members as "the process of exchange to structuralize or re-structuralize." Herse & Blanchard [11] defined it as "the process of influencing the activities of an individual or group to achieve goals in a given situation." Northouse [13] defined it as "the process that an individual influences group members to achieve their common goals."

The traditional researches on leadership theory include situation theory, behavioral theory, and trait theory. The discussion of leadership started from the trait theory that identified the physical and personal characteristics commonly shared by leaders and was replaced by the behavioral theory that focused on the psychology-based functions of a leader in the 1950s because leadership was recognized as something going beyond the common characteristics shared by leaders. When the usefulness of a particular type of leadership was explored from the late 1960s to the 1970s, the situational theory that sought for suitable behaviors for a situation became predominant and has been accepted as the underlying premise for leadership researches till now. After the 1970s, relationship between leader and follower and followership from the follower's perspective appeared unlike the initial leadership theory. Unlike the assumption that leadership satisfies the follower and job performance as outcome variables from the 1980s to the 1990s, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and charismatic leadership theories developed by Burns [4] and Bass [2] assumed changes in and innovation of an organization or organization members as outcome variables. After the 1990s, new perspectives and concepts such as self-leadership, super leadership, and issue leadership have been proposed for adapting to the changing trends of society and for continuous survival and development of an enterprise. Now the leadership research has been discussed from various

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perspectives and the necessity of developing applicable theories and new leadership paradigms is being emphasized. Covey's 7-habits, emotional leadership, color leadership, Dale Carnegie leadership, and servant leadership have been discussed centering on the working-level theories to complement the limitations of the existing traditional theories.

### III. SERVANT LEADERSHIP THEORY

#### A. Definition

Servant leadership is a combination of the two words, 'servant' and 'leader' which were recognized as conflicting concepts and can be defined as the leadership that a leader focuses on voluntary work for others with altruistic ethics, elicits a potential from subordinates, and forms teamwork and team spirit. Servant leadership was established in theory after the concept was introduced in "The servant as leader" by Greenleaf [9], creator of servant leadership. Greenleaf gained insight into servant leadership through the figure of 'Leo' who appeared in "Journey to the East", novel written by 'Hermann Hesse.' Like 'Leo,' servant leader is the leader who wants to become a sincere and ethical leader and above all, become a servant who can be reliable and respected [8]. He revealed in his book that the concept of servant leadership was closely associated with Jesus Christ leadership, leadership of serving. He assumed that every human has the human nature of being a servant and that this nature was forgotten by social environment or organizational environment and the concept of leader discolored itself and changed into the person who instructs and the person who orders. Therefore, he maintained that the recovery of the nature of servant is the recovery of human nature.

Bass [2] presented corporate goals as a means to satisfy organization members' growth needs, self-expression, and maturity needs and said that the organization displaying the leadership that is consistent with this has the most effective leadership. Therefore, the role of servant leader is to offer an opportunity to exert creativity and help organization members grow. Senge [15] said that servant leadership is the leadership that is based on the democratic principle that all humans' belief in dignity and value and the power of leader stems from subordinates. This enables organization members to voluntarily participate in performing tasks within the department or team and promote their learning. Sims [16] maintained that servant leadership is the leadership that leader respects subordinates' dignity and value as human being and arouses their creative capability. He defined servant leader as a learner who promotes sharing of vision, a person who uses power to solve the thing that is necessary for others, a person who promotes cooperation with the community, a person who accepts other's opinions, a person who communicates with others honestly, and a person who encourages others. Boyer [3] defined servant leader as leader who is delicate and listens carefully to others and leader who encourages subordinates and colleagues to develop themselves and delegates his/her authority. Finally, Daft [5] defined servant leader as leader who makes subordinates' interests a priority, fills their needs, helps them to grow, and

offers an opportunity to obtain material and emotional benefits.

#### B. Behavior Characteristics of Servant Leadership and Lower Dimensions

Spears [17], director of Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership in United States, defined servant leadership as the "leadership which was based on the democratic principle that belief in human dignity and value and authority of leader stemmed from subordinates" and presented ten behavior characteristics based on Greenleaf's theory. Spears' elements expressed as the characteristics of servant leadership were not extracted with scientific methods but became an opportunity that initiated discussion on the scientific area of servant leadership [7]. Thereafter, such elements were utilized as factors for servant leadership in many empirical researches or became the foundations for developing new measurement scales. The specific conceptual concepts are as follows.

Listening is the most fundamental qualification for servant leader and an attitude that a leader wants to know subordinate's needs actively and positively with the receptive attitude of respecting and listening to them. Empathy means "putting yourself in the shoes of the other person." It is an attitude to understand others' situations rather than your situation by feeling sympathy and try to understand others' emotional state or opinion. Healing is an attitude to recover worsened health and relations that stemmed from task performance among members in excessively competitive situations. Helping to heal such wounds is characterized by servant leadership. This attitude helps living a life within the community by respecting and being considerate of each other. The use of power by a leader, there are divided into coercion, adjustment, and persuasion. Among them, servant leader only uses the method of persuasion. Exercising power through coercion is repulsed by others even if it's a right thing. In the process of reaching an agreement among organization members, persuading others can be more influential and achieving higher performance can be more pursued than expected. Awareness helps to realize in the same situations more than anyone else and determine both the entire situations and the influential factors to the situations as exactly as possible. It also helps to present organization members with insight and vision. Moreover, as it includes self-awareness with realization of surrounding environments, it means 'serving others' based on the self-realization. Foresight means an ability to predict the current outcomes by projecting type of experience that one encountered in the past into the future with experience and intuition that one had in the past. As the future cannot be known only with experience in the past, intuition is required. The vision for future can be presented through intuition and insight. Conceptualization is associated with the fact that a leader presents vision; direction is set by connecting the vision with goals. Greenleaf [9] presented two obligations for servant leader. The first one is to foresee the future and set directions and concentrate on making organization members develop themselves. Stewardship is the most fundamental attitude for servant leader. It is an attitude to prioritize others' needs rather than an individual's personal needs and in the first place think about the impact of such

outcomes on the organization members in the situation that they need to make a decision. For organization members, resources are managed; voluntary work is carried out; community's performance is created; community is developed for organization members; and organization is prepared to contribute to the society positively through program and voluntary activity. Greenleaf [10] maintained that achievement can be made through growth by emphasizing the growth of members. Therefore, discretionary power is granted to members and an opportunity to help members perform their tasks actively and exert their potentials and do learning is offered. What's important in community building is that members recognize them as part of the whole community. Servant leader emphasizes active communication and cooperation among members to build community.

Besides, Wheaten [18] proposed that listening, sympathy, awareness, community building, insight, and vision were the most effective characteristics that a leader should have. Boyer [3] classified servant leadership into seven lower dimensions such as question and understanding, respect and gratitude, encouragement and care, ethicality, delegation of authority and promotion of learning, relation and community building, and trust. Laub [12] classified servant leadership into six lower dimensions such as respect of people, growth, morality, community building, provision of leadership, and sharing of leadership. This is an instrument made to measure the awareness of organization among members from the organizational culture's perspective. Patterson [14] presented agape, humility, altruism, trust, vision, empowerment, and service as seven elements for servant leadership. Based on this, Dennis & Bocarnea [6] developed five-element scales like empowerment, love, humility, trust, and vision. Barbutto & Wheeler [1] presented a total of eleven factors by adding

'calling' to Spears' ten factors such as listening, sympathy, healing, persuasion, awareness, insight, provision of vision, stewardship, growth of members, and community building and made 56 questionnaire items for actual proof analysis and received a questionnaire from 388 experts and then extracted and presented a total of five sub-factors such as altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasion, and stewardship.

#### IV. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND OTHER TYPES OF LEADERSHIP

With the new role of a leader being emphasized, leader in the existing leadership played a role of leading the subordinates, whereas the servant leadership proposed by Spears achieved corporate goals through leader's voluntary work because it is the leadership that a leader thinks about organization members from their perspectives rather than having a strong charisma and forms good relations with them. Servant leadership is a new type of leadership that a leader instills subordinates' voluntary commitment, participation, ownership, and responsibility, helps others develop themselves, and leads them. The traditional leader before servant leadership was a leadership suitable for achieving corporate goals in the short term in the period of industrialization, but has limitations in this period that requires continuous high performance [19]. Therefore, servant leadership that focused on subordinates attracted attention. Servant leader respects organization members in the medium to longer term to achieve corporate goals. Traditional leadership focused on task management rather than humans, whereas servant leadership is the leadership that focused on the relations with humans who delegated authority to organization members and promoted businesses.

TABLE I  
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

	Traditional leadership	Servant leadership
Awareness of resources	Organization member is one of the resources and an object of producing outcomes as instructed by a leader.	Organization member is the most important resource in achieving corporate goals and leader helps organization members grow and foster their abilities.
Production of an organization	Task-oriented rather than humans. Time, expense, and production are visible and evaluated from quantitative contribution.	Human-centered. The outcome of task and the degree of voluntary behaviors of organization members are evaluated.
Trust and empowerment among organization members	Leader's experience and knowledge is superior to organization members' ones. Organization member's criticism or contrary opinion is neglected.	A leader trusts in the ability of organization members and respects their judgment in performing tasks. A leader supports necessary resources so that organization members can promote their business with delegated authority.
Investment and communication method	Top-down unilateral communication	Two-way communication Communication is activated and small and big information are all shared.

#### V. CRITICISM OF ADVANCED RESEARCH

Although the existing researches on the concept of servant leadership have not been discussed as fully as possible, empirical researches on the outcomes of servant leadership are now conducted. Specifically, the criticisms of the previous researches are as follows.

First, servant leadership has the generality of being applicable to enterprise, church, school, and government, but even Greenleaf [10] who introduced this concept for the first time mentioned that this concept was too naive to be applicable

into the reality. In fact, the two words 'servant' and 'leadership' are combined although they look conflicting each other. So it contains this paradox that "to become a leader, be a servant." At the same time, the meaning of 'serve' has not been concretized. This is why the concept of servant leadership has not reached an agreement yet.

Second, as the beginning of the concept of servant leadership is based on the leadership of figures appearing in creative novels, they are the beings who are difficult to be found in reality. This is why minimal agreement on the theoretical

framework of servant leadership has not been made in the research findings so far. Since research models at the verifiable level have not been proposed and Spears's elements are too excessively normative, the problem of measurement validity still remains. Therefore, it is necessary to look for specific and situation-suitable elements and outcome variables while maintaining the essentials of 'serving leadership' escaping from Greenleaf's salvational normativity and discursive discussion. In terms of extracting elements, it is necessary to obtain ontological evidence escaping from the normative perspective. As it is difficult to obtain realistic usability in this process, it would be helpful to develop questionnaire items that question about what qualifications should be kept by a servant leader.

Finally, servant leadership is empirically useful, but it is difficult to be academically acknowledged in the process of measuring and verifying whether ambiguous concepts are used. The models and elements of servant leadership were proposed in the previous researches, but the core message of servant leadership is clear and simple with the meaning of support, fostering, and consideration toward organization members. Therefore, if further researches develop measurement scales and reconstruct verifiable models by extracting elements, it will be helpful to secure differentiation from the previous leaderships and be valuable academically as well.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Servant leadership was introduced by Greenleaf since 1970 and conducted in a quiet way by supporters and then established its legitimacy as one field of leadership research in the late 1990s. Servant leadership is an approach to corporate goals by making organization members' individual growth needs a priority. The direction-control leadership revealed its limitations early in the 21st century and the task performance method in the age of knowledge information became different from the previous researches. Like this, as the organization member's autonomy was reinforced, it caused the appearance of new leadership. In other words, the traditional leadership that emphasized the authoritative role shown in the past discolored itself in the society that environmental changes were swift, and the smooth communication between subordinates and supervisors and making a contribution as assistant have become important.

Therefore, under this flow, servant leadership became an approach to corporate goals by taking into account of organizational subordinates' individual growth needs in priority and combined corporate missions and relations within one framework. It is a new perspective on organization management that did not focus on the role of leader who simply led subordinates but achieved corporate goals through horizontal consensus building and serving of leader based on mutual trust. In this rapidly-changing management environment today, utilizing servant leadership in a strategic way can play an important role in improving organizational performance.

The theory of servant leadership is difficult to be established as scientific theory yet. So it is reasonable to see it as emerging leadership philosophy. To look at the existing empirical

researches, they were discussed when the scientific strictness to be kept by empirical studies in social science was not satisfied. In particular, it is ambiguous to measure the most important variables in social science study. The analysis results are difficult to be seen as having internal validity and realistic usability because sufficient discussion of elements was not made. As seen in the previous researches so far, servant leadership faces excessively ideal and unrealistic criticism, but verifiable models should be reconstructed by developing measurement scales and extracting elements in the reality that the traditional leadership is challenged by sociocultural changes or organizational changes. By doing so, servant leadership will have a potential value as alternative leadership.

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