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Servant leadership: Validation of a short form of the SL-28

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ABSTRACT

Although research on servant leadership has been expanding over the past several years, a concise, valid scale for assessing global servant leadership has been lacking. In the current investigation a 7-item measure of global servant leadership (SL-7), based on Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson's (2008) 28-item servant leadership measure (SL-28), is introduced. Psychometric properties of the SL-7 were assessed at the individual level with data collected from 729 undergraduate students, 218 graduate students, and 552 leader–follower dyads from 11 organizations, and at the team level with a study consisting of a total of 71 ongoing intact work teams. Results across three independent studies with six samples showed correlations between the SL-7 and SL-28 scales ranging from .78 to .97, internal consistency reliabilities over .80 in all samples, and significant criterion-related validities for the SL-7 that parallel those found with the SL-28.

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Introduction

In response to the increasing need for employee engagement, creativity, and sharing among coworkers, as well as societal demands for higher levels of ethical behavior in organizations, servant leadership has emerged as a desirable approach to leadership, because it promotes integrity, focuses on helping others, and prioritizes bringing out the full potential of followers. Indeed, servant leadership offers the promise of combatting negative outcomes associated with promoting one's self-interest (O'Reilly, Doerr, Caldwell, & Chatman, 2014), which appears to underlie many incidents of unethical behavior (Hoogervorst, De Cremer, & van Dijke, 2010). Servant leadership, although alluded to in ancient philosophy, was introduced in the contemporary vernacular by Robert Greenleaf (1970) in his classic essay. Greenleaf stressed the importance of leaders prioritizing the support and development of followers, accomplishing this by setting an example through demonstrating honesty, compassion, and hard work. Servant leadership is unique relative to other approaches to leadership for its prioritization of serving followers before attending to one's own needs, acting as a servant leader in all realms of life – work, home and community – and developing followers into servant leaders.

Although Greenleaf's (1970) essay appeared prior to the introduction of the most widely studied approaches to leadership (Dinh et al., 2014), transformational leadership (TFL, Bass, 1985) and leader–member exchange (LMX; Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975), empirical scientific investigation of servant leadership was not actively pursued by researchers until after the publication of the seminal work by Mark Ehrhart (2004). Over the past 10 years, empirical research has demonstrated the incremental value of servant leadership as evidenced by the explanation of additional variance beyond TFL, LMX, and/or consideration/initiating structure (Fleishman, 1998) in individual (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008; van

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Dierendonck, Stam, Boersma, de Windt, & Alkema, 2014), group (Ehrhart, 2004; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011), and organizational (Peterson, Galvin, & Lange, 2012) outcomes. The strength and consistency of the incremental variance demonstrated in these studies has served to legitimize servant leadership as a construct worthy of continued research attention.

Servant leadership has been presented as a multidimensional construct (Ehrhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The dimensions uncovered by Liden and colleagues are: 1) *emotional healing*, which involves the degree to which the leader cares about followers' personal problems and well-being; 2) *creating value for the community*, which captures the leader's involvement in helping the community surrounding the organization as well as encouraging followers to be active in the community; 3) *conceptual skills*, reflecting the leader's competency in solving work problems and understanding the organization's goals; 4) *empowering*, assessing the degree to which the leader entrusts followers with responsibility, autonomy, and decision-making influence; 5) *helping subordinates grow and succeed*, capturing the extent to which the leader helps followers reach their full potential and succeed in their careers; 6) *putting subordinates first*, assessing the degree to which the leader prioritizes meeting the needs of followers before tending to his or her own needs; and 7) *behaving ethically*, which includes being honest, trustworthy, and serving as a model of integrity.

As with any multidimensional construct, it is important to specify the nature of relationships between each dimension and the overall or global construct (Law, Wong, & Mobley, 1998). Law et al. (1998, p. 743) specify three "relational forms" in which dimensions relate to the overall construct: 1) latent, in which the construct "exists at a deeper conceptual level than its dimensions;" 2) aggregate, describing constructs that "can be formed as an algebraic function of its dimensions;" and 3) profile, which are constructs that are based on "levels of each of the dimensions." Servant leadership is best represented by the aggregate model, as it is a construct that consists of the sum of its dimensions. Indeed, none of these dimensions alone, or even subsets of the dimensions, adequately capture the complexity of global servant leadership. In contrast to the aggregate model where the construct is formed from its dimensions, Law et al. (1998) describe the latent model as the focal construct leading to its dimensions. We contend that servant leadership is not a higher-level construct that underlies its dimensions because the dimensions of servant leadership are not representing the same construct with different degrees of accuracy but instead are capturing different aspects of leader behavior. Servant leadership also does not fit the typology for a profile multidimensional construct. According to Law et al. (1998), a profile construct can only be interpreted via a "set of profiled characteristics of the dimensions; there is not a single theoretical overall construct that summarizes and represents all of the dimensions" (p. 747). This is not the case for servant leadership as there is theory and empirical research that supports the overall construct. Servant leadership is thus best described as the combination of its dimensions. It captures honest leaders who put the needs of followers first, promote helping in the larger community as well as at work, and possess the technical skills necessary to provide meaningful help to followers.

Consistent with its identity as an "aggregate" construct (Johnson, Rosen, & Chang, 2011; Law et al., 1998), it is typically operationalized in its global form. This is appropriate given that servant leadership theory describes a comprehensive approach to leading. For example, although it contains an ethical behavior component, it extends far beyond ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005), by specifying the multiple elements necessary for serving followers. Extending beyond TFL, leaders not only individualize their consideration for followers but put the fulfillment of follower needs ahead of satisfying their own personal needs. Similarly, servant leadership transcends LMX by not only providing support to followers, but attending to the personal needs of followers that may go beyond the work setting. While it is useful to explore specific research questions with the dimensions separately, capturing the full essence of the construct requires the combination of all of its dimensions.

When focusing on overall servant leadership, each dimension must be captured in a global measure, but not as many items are needed as when each dimension is analyzed separately. Indeed, at least three items per dimension are required when dimensions are assessed individually for the purpose of accurately estimating internal consistency reliability of each dimension. A global measure requires a total of at least three items for the same reason, but does not require three or more items per dimension. In fact, Credé, Harms, Niehorster, and Gaye-Valentine (2012) argued that long scales may have the unintended effect of reducing respondent attention when reading items, thus lowering the integrity of responses and subsequent validity. In sum, there are both theoretical and design factors that favor concise global measures.

Given the consistent support for relationships between servant leadership and important individual, team/unit, and organizational outcomes, researchers have focused their attention on better understanding both the processes through which servant leadership affects outcomes as well as the antecedents of servant leadership. Pursuing such an ambitious research agenda requires sound measurement of servant leadership. Although a number of measures have been introduced, the scale developed by Liden et al. (2008) has been frequently used due to the rigorous methods employed in its development (van Dierendonck, 2011). One limitation of this measure, however, is its 28-item length. The large number of items not only takes time that could otherwise be used for measuring additional variables, but also may introduce fatigue or boredom among respondents, which may negatively influence the quality of the responses obtained (Credé et al., 2012). At the same time, Credé et al. (2012) stress that short scales may compromise validity when not developed using rigorous methods. Thus, in introducing a 7-item unidimensional version of the original SL-28 scale (Liden et al., 2008), labeled "SL-7," we followed the recommendations of Credé et al. (2012) for creating short versions of scales. These scholars emphasize the need for and assessment of several forms of validity, including criterion-related validity, as well as utilizing multiple diverse independent samples. Our ultimate goal was to develop a global measure of overall servant leadership that is substantially shorter than the original SL-28, but at the same time captures each of the seven dimensions assessed in the full 28-item scale. A second purpose of the current investigation is to provide additional validation of the full 28-item measure, which may be the measure of choice when research questions require assessing servant leadership dimensions separately.