3
Opportunities and Tensions of Servant Leadership

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> You've held on to the spirit of servant leadership,
> you've kept it vague and indefinable, which I think is a
> great strategic advantage. People can come every year
> to figure out what the hell this is, and by not answer-
> ing, they're forced to come the next year. So it's both
> a clever marketing strategy and a stance in support of
> the spirit of it rather than the substance of it.
>
> (Peter Block to Larry Spears,
> Greenleaf International Servant
> Leadership Conference 2005)

Peter Block's humorous and perceptive aside to Larry Spears, during
Block's keynote address to the Greenleaf International Servant Leadership
Conference 2005, raises three important questions and potential chal-
lenges for advocates of servant leadership, and for leaders seeking to
determine whether its principles resonate with their understanding of
leadership and the needs of their organizations. First, as servant leader-
ship becomes more popular, with growing popularity potentially bring-
ing greater chances of misunderstanding and misapplication, how can
it be explained and explored in terms helpful to leaders while remaining
true to its central principles? Second, how can the absence of a simple
definition of servant leadership, and the intentional lack of a formulaic
set of rules, be reconciled with a leader's need to appreciate fully how
the concept can be applied within their organizations? Third, it may be
better for advocates to remain faithful to 'the spirit of it rather than the
substance of it', but what principles and practices need to be understood
by leaders wishing to demonstrate servant leadership's potential contri-
bution to the bottom-line performance of their businesses?

25

Life is full of curious and meaningful paradoxes. Servant leadership is one such paradox that has slowly but surely gained hundreds of thousands of adherents over the past 40 years. The seeds that have been planted have begun to sprout in many institutions, as well as in the hearts of many who long to improve the human condition. Servant leadership is providing a framework from which many thousands of known and unknown individuals are helping to improve how we treat those who do the work within our many institutions. Servant leadership truly offers hope and guidance for a new era in human development, and for the creation of better, more caring institutions.

The three diagnostic questions concern definition, application and contribution; and it is by means of such questions that leaders typically seek to understand and implement most management and general business concepts. However, Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership does not lend itself to those three tried and tested diagnostic questions: at first, the enquirer may not readily understand the key principles of servant leadership (especially the intriguing play on the hyphenated words 'servant' and 'leader'); may fail to see how it can be applied within their organization; and may struggle to believe there can be any contribution, presently or potentially, to the 'bottom-line' performance of the business. Robert K. Greenleaf does not comply with the tried and tested definition-application-contribution rubric – his writing is of another style – and consequently others have interpreted and applied his thoughts through various emphases and approaches, illustrating ways in which servant leadership principles can be applied individually and corporately.

This chapter identifies those different emphases or approaches, highlighting the irreducible and irreplaceable minimum lying at the core of what it means to be a servant-leader, to answer fundamental questions concerning definition, application and contribution, and to signal opportunities and tensions that may occur.

Context

Greenleaf's best-known quotation (see Chapter 2) captures the essence lying at the heart of the concept of servant leadership – namely, that someone chooses to serve others and realises that the best way of serving their needs is through acting as leader. Therein is both the profundity and simplicity at the core of being a servant-leader, and Greenleaf's words point out:

> The servant-leader is servant first
> one wants to serve, to serve first
> That person is sharply different from one who is leader first
> The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types
> The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first
>   to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being
>   served.

He saw the leader-first and the servant-first as different persons and, although the servant-leader incorporates components of service and

leadership, it is the servant element that is more prominent. As Keith (2008) stresses, the role of a servant-leader must be seen chiefly as an act of service: this service is born out of 'the natural feeling that one wants to serve' and the act of leading must be seen as the conscious choice of the servant.

The significance of being *servant* first and then *leader* is recognized by various respected academics as the following two examples show:

> Servant leadership is leadership upside-down. Servant-leaders transcend self-interest to serve the needs of others, help others grow and develop, and provide opportunity for others to gain materially and emotionally. The fulfilment of others is the servant-leader's principal aim. (Daft, 2007)

> Greenleaf ... says that the first and most important choice a leader makes is the choice to serve, without which one's capacity to lead is profoundly limited. That choice is not an action in the normal sense – it's not something you do, but an expression of your being. (Senge, 1996)

There is little doubt that Greenleaf would have welcomed the growing interest being shown in servant leadership – 'Nothing could have made Robert Greenleaf happier than to see the ongoing evolution of his ideas since 1990' (Spears, 2004) – and it is apparent that Greenleaf was not prescriptive in his writings – 'I will remind you in offering you these conversations that I am not presuming to tell you how you should think. Rather, I am offering what I think in the hope you will say what you think and then, out of the dialogue, all of us will be wiser' (Freeman 2000). However, believing in an 'evolution of his ideas' is not the same as acquiescing to their mutation into something quite alien, and being free to 'say what you think' carries with it a commitment to intellectual rigour and experiential honesty. Therefore, those subscribing to Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership appreciate some things are non-negotiable and recognize certain boundaries.

With this admonition very much in mind, a close examination of the literature (Prosser, 2009) reveals seven different yet complementary emphases of servant leadership and, unless these different emphases are recognized and valued, generalised statements may be made that are potentially misleading for those wishing to learn more about this philosophy of leadership. (The emphases have been identified through a combination of analysis and sensitive humour, and an

apology is offered willingly to anyone offended by some of the terms employed.)

Different emphases of servant leadership

The Poets (or romanticists and visionaries)

The Poets emphasize the romantic and visionary aspects of Greenleaf's writings, and the inspirational role played by literature, including poetry, on his thinking. Without question, Greenleaf was a visionary – an idealist – and he wanted others to appreciate what life in the workplace, and in the broader community, could and should be like

The Poets turn to various leadership writers who use poetry to explain and expand their ideas. For example, Max DePree (1989) laments the fact that 'talent may go unnoticed and unused' by quoting Thomas Gray's famous verse (from *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*):

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
> The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
> Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Jim Autry's (1991) poetry is used to expand fundamental servant leadership and business points, and poetry is featured and celebrated in *The International Journal of Servant Leadership* (IJS-L). Volume 2, for example, contained a poem by Meg Wheatley, Greenleaf on Robert Frost, a chapter called *A Poetics of Servant Leadership*, and concluded with a section entitled *A Place for Poetry*.

However, *romanticists* and *visionaries* move beyond poetry, believing that the widespread application of servant leadership can bring about fundamental changes in the very nature of society – the IJS-L's manuscript reviewers' guidance document speaks admirably of 'educating the whole person' in order to 'heal the heart of humanity' – and their commendable idealism generates articles with titles including phrases such as: *Servant Leadership and Unconditional Forgiveness*; *Servant Leadership, Forgiveness, and Unlimited Liability*; *Happiness, Success, Quality Of Life, And Love*; and more.

The Romanticists possess admirable passion, and their views are often reflected in the writings of others who encourage new patterns of work and relationships to emerge within the employment relationship, including those not holding a declared servant leadership persuasion. Others consider this focus on poetry and romance to be tangential,

at best, to their understanding of the world of work; they favour the appeal of 'The Managerialists', with their understanding of how servant leadership should be applied within the world of business.

The Managerialists (or partially reconstructed Taylorites)

In his non-poetic guise, in *The Servant Leader* (2004) with its references to performance management, negative appraisal, firing people, handling conflict, leadership when things go wrong, and much else, Autry deals with servant leadership in practice – or the harsh realities of organizational life, as he calls it – and, understandably, this is what the Managerialists consider to be the 'real world'. Autry considers the application of servant leadership within the context of business, and shows how sound managerial practice may be applied systematically while adhering to, and being guided by, servant leadership principles.

Similarly, Douglas's (2003) discussion of servant leadership among supervisors shows that the principles and practices are grounded in the reality of corporate life: 'Supervisors who model servant leadership will face all the challenges of any other manager – personal and organizational conflict, budget crises, sexual harassment, hirings and firings, reorganizations and complex ethical dilemmas. The difference is the approach servant-leaders use in making decisions and managing resources.'

In typically graphic style, Stephen Covey (1994), the renowned management guru, also exemplifies that a servant-leader can become engaged in tough action: 'Later in life, I served as a vice president under a benevolent dictator. The servant-leader who replaced him was actually tougher. That experience taught me that servant leadership is not soft or touchy-feely. It's a much tougher style because when you set up performance agreements and become a source of help, people have to be tough on themselves. They just can't sit around and blame others.' Reinke (2004) makes a similar point: 'the servant-leader does not accept mediocre performance, but keeps everyone focused on achieving organizational objectives within the constraints of shared organizational values'.

Many other commentators agree. McGee-Cooper and Looper's *Lessons on Layoffs: Managing in Good Times to Prepare for Bad Times* (2001b) provides advice on how a servant-leader should handle layoffs, and examples of how the servant-leader can utilize human resource policy and practices to make the organization healthier, thereby obviating the need for redundancies. They also comment on management practices to 'weed out non-performers within the six-month probationary period'.

This notion of performance is also found in the work of Irving and Longbotham (2006), 'We trust that these findings will encourage

increased exploration into the positive effects of servant leadership on team effectiveness, as well as a robust application of servant leadership in contemporary organizational settings'. Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) conclude their examination of servant leadership with 'The excitement · surrounding servant leadership may be justified, as it appears strong relationships with positive outcomes such as employers' extra effort, employees' satisfaction, and perceptions of organizational effectiveness were found. Organizations may look for opportunities to recruit individuals who possess servant leadership characteristics'.

Arguably, the work of Showkeir (2002) illustrates the managerialist approach in clearer terms than anyone else. He recognizes that, in order for servant leadership to be positioned alongside successful business practice, a *sine qua non* in his writing, it needs 'a solid business argument that reconciles the attainment of unequivocal business results (profit, market share, and so on) with the need and longing for individual meaning and purpose at work'. He believes that much of the misunderstanding over servant leadership is because of a lack of 'connection between servant leadership and attaining business results'. These references illustrate an important principle: sound managerial practice need not be antithetical to the principles of servant leadership.

The Egalitarians (or redistributive socialists)

The speeches and writings of George SanFacon (for example, *Awake At Work*, 2008) epitomize the views of the Egalitarians, who view servant leadership as an opportunity to create new structures and governance in the workplace, thereby redistributing power from single managers to a wider community of participants. SanFacon's leadership of the University of Michigan's Housing Facilities Department resulted in a removal of their traditional management hierarchy, and the introduction of shared governance with managers in collaborative teams – the traditional boss–subordinate relationships were removed, with managers reporting to a Council. As SanFacon and colleagues (Malinoski and SanFacon, 1998) describe:

> [The] Facilities Council decision making is collective and done strictly by consensus ... The Council's consensus process consists of hearing and understanding what each individual has to say, and reaching a decision that is acceptable to all and consistent with the mission statement ... Departmental staff and others may appeal decisions made by the Council or a Council member

The Egalitarian emphasis can be detected in their description of 'consensus decision making', 'resources freely shared across units', 'time for participants to adjust to the equalization of their roles', and 'power and authority distributed more equally among the members'. SanFacon developed his thinking in *Awake At Work* (2008), and the following quote illustrates egalitarianism precisely:

> Organizations – both for-profits and not-for-profits – are deserving of our commitment and support to the extent that they extend such consideration to each of their stakeholders ... With consensus decision-making and open access to decision-making bodies, every person in the system has influence and power. No one person has unilateral power over another, and there is protection against the arbitrary use of power.

Many find this approach appealing, and Bowie's *A Kantian Theory of Leadership* (2000) resonates with SanFacon: 'Kant's moral philosophy ... is basically egalitarian ... Given these egalitarian commitments, how can Kant provide a theory of leadership when 'leadership' has connotations of elitism and hierarchy?' As Bowie develops his argument, he comments: 'Perhaps a Kantian would endorse a theory of leadership that specifically eschews the notion that the leader is somehow superior to his or her followers. Servant leadership is one such theory ... there are many passages in Greenleaf that would fit with a Kantian theory of leadership.'

For many, that represents a step too far, perhaps even an abrogation of the leader's responsibility to lead, of the manager's responsibility to manage; but, for others, it represents the application of one of Greenleaf's cardinal principles: that leadership should be exercised on the basis of *primus inter pares* – first among equals – and what, they contend, could be more appropriate than the emphasis typified by SanFacon.

The Peripherals (or zealots and agnostics)

The Peripherals are a diverse group of people and organizations unified through a common characteristic: they confess allegiance to servant leadership principles without any necessary reference to the work of Greenleaf. Apart from this common factor, they include a disparate range of views and reputations, from the commendable to the questionable (and both categories remain nameless).

First, are many overtly Christian writers, speakers and websites, who base their views on Bible verses such as 'And whosoever will be chief

among you, let him be your servant' (Matthew 20: 27 KJV). Building on such teaching, they construct a series of principles to expound the principle of servant leadership. Then there are institutes established to 'provide opportunities for the spiritual formation and leadership development of people who are called to be servant-leaders', and training organizations who introduce clients to 'a unique style of leadership that is modelled on the approach of Him who said he came to serve, not be served', and universities introducing students to 'the nature, styles, and skills of Servant Leadership, utilising historic and contemporary models and emphasising moral roots of responsible leadership'. Some Christian organizations appear to equate servant leadership's apotheosis with work to alleviate the needs of the least privileged in society: 'asylum seekers, the homeless and drug addicts'.

Typically, such organizations have admirable aims, undertaking commendable work – the word 'zealots' is used charitably – and, although they may make fleeting references to a Greenleaf website, usually they promote servant leadership from a standpoint peripheral to Greenleaf's writings.

The *agnostics* comprise writers who advocate servant leadership, but their writings reveal that they are not advocating it from a Greenleaf perspective, or (at times), it appears, from any other robust body of work. Within this group of agnostics are books, journal articles and websites that may have servant leadership in the title, or in a prominent position, but contain little reference to servant leadership in a recognizable form. Worse still, they may contain sentiments running counter to Greenleaf and other advocates. They may contain many important points regarding leadership, consistent with many leadership textbooks, but the whole thrust of the article misses, and perhaps contradicts, many of the fundamental servant leadership principles. This is the reason for labelling them *agnostics* – they continue to struggle to come to terms with a set of beliefs that are clear and relevant to others. The Peripherals contain reputable individuals (and their companies) but, for some reason, often they have not fully grasped the significant and substantial distinguishing characteristics of servant leadership as set out by Greenleaf.

The Discreet (or silent disciples)

The Discreet are those people who are wary, circumspect, and prudent; in other words, they are cautionary and guarded, and concerned that any understanding and application of servant leadership should recognize the contextual aspects of their organization. They may adhere to servant leadership principles without declaring their commitment

publicly. For that reason, many of these individuals and organizations are difficult to identify.

To illustrate this contextual point, take the example of two businesses with a deserved reputation for their commitment to servant leadership: TDIndustries and Southwest Airlines are among the most frequently mentioned exemplar organizations (see also Chapter 11 for a more elaborate description of these companies). The TDI website's *Culture, Mission, and Values* page announces, 'TDIndustries strives to model the management style defined by Robert Greenleaf as 'Servant Leadership'. We firmly believe our shift to this culture during the 70s has made us one of the most unique companies in the country – it is to this practice that we attribute our many years of success.' Its servant leadership page tells its customers that the company 'uses Robert Greenleaf's essay, *The Servant as Leader* (1970), as a blueprint for our behaviour'.

The Southwest Airlines website is quite different, even though their commitment to servant leadership is unequivocal. At the time of writing, a 10-minute visit to their website could find no overt reference to servant leadership. This was quite unexpected, as there are many *YouTube* clips of their former president, Colleen Barrett, promoting the virtues of servant leadership and its beneficial effect within the business. The site contains its mission statement with the words 'We are committed to provide our Employees a stable work environment with equal opportunity for learning and personal growth. Creativity and innovation are encouraged for improving the effectiveness of Southwest Airlines. Above all, Employees will be provided the same concern, respect, and caring attitude within the organization that they are expected to share externally with every Southwest Customer.' While it is possible to detect the servant leadership influence throughout the site (in much the same way as their commitment to distributed leadership can be detected on other websites), there is no overt declaration of adherence to the Greenleaf principles.

This example, from two companies with an impressive servant leadership track record, merely illustrates the contextual aspect of what may motivate many of the Discreet. Anecdotally, and based on numerous conversations with executives at leadership conferences, it is possible to describe other companies as committed to servant leadership principles but reticent when it comes to making a public announcement, and sometimes even a clear statement within the privacy of their own companies. They prefer not to wear the tag or label in a way that identifies them with what others may consider another management concept or fad. For some, it makes sense to make a bold declaration; for others, it does not.

What is true for organizations can be even truer of individuals; again, there is an abundance of anecdotal evidence. As discussed in *To Be A Servant-Leader* (Prosser, 2007), some individuals work as leaders in businesses where the organizational culture is inimical to the principles of servant leadership. Such courageous individuals remain true to their belief in Greenleaf's writings, ensuring that they do not alienate their bosses or enable colleagues and staff to seek or gain unfair advantage. After all, being a servant-leader does not equate with being naïve.

It is clear that sincere individuals and whole organizations can be loyal to the principles of servant leadership, yet remain discreet.

The Syncretists (or harmonisers and mystics)

A Syncretist is someone who attempts to reconcile or blend different dimensions of belief and practice into their lives and, as these quotes illustrate, sees it as a logical conclusion of acting consistently in every aspect of their life:

> So there is a strand in servant leadership that encourages us to take a more holistic view of who we are as individuals, which helps to stop this compartmentalization that considers work as one part of our life and the rest of our life as something completely different. (Larry Spears in Lloyd, 1996)

> The servant leadership concept is a principle, a natural law, and getting our social value systems and personal habits aligned with this ennobling principle is one of the great challenges of our lives. (Stephen Covey, 1998)

> Is Servant Leadership a Spiritual Concept? Well, of course it is! You will find it in the sacred writings of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. But you will also find versions of it in secular humanism and in systems that are theistic and non-theistic. (Don Frick, 2007)

Links with philosophy, ethics, philanthropy, virtues, mysticism, emotional intelligence, self-esteem and much more can be detected in many servant leadership journal articles. The contributors, academics and practitioners alike, readily describe servant leadership in terms of its connection with other ideas and practices – partly to legitimize it, partly to encourage further adherents, but chiefly it appears to syncretize, and thereby rationalize, a kaleidoscope of belief and practice (as the three quotes above and the two examples below demonstrate).

Korac-Kakabadse, Kouzmin and Kakabadse's 'Spirituality and Leadership Praxis' (2002) shows that, while 'spirituality, historically, has been rooted in religion ... its current use in business and in the workplace is most often not associated with any specific religious tradition'. They add that 'Increased attention to personal meaning and transformative leadership has shown striking benefits of integrating personal development and awareness at work'. They also quote various sources to illustrate 'the dramatic increase in interest in incorporating spirituality into management theory, management development and management practice'.

The second example is found in the work of Whetstone (2002), who sets out to identify a link between servant leadership and what he calls personalism, which he explains through terms such as 'centrality of the person', 'human dignity', and 'participation and solidarity'. – and His assertion that 'Servant leadership is a more appropriate paradigm for implementing personalism with the business community' is significant from the perspective of the servant leadership Syncretist, as is a concluding point that 'genuine servant leadership is consistent with the five themes of the philosophy of personalism'.

Spears's quote, at the start of this section, went on to remind readers that Robert Greenleaf 'really felt people would grow best, in both a personal and spiritual sense, by being encouraged to integrate more fully both their personal and their work lives'; and Frick's (2007) quote concluded with, 'You could say that Greenleaf took a religious concept, distilled the spirituality beyond doctrine, and applied it in fresh ways'.

It would be wrong to claim that Greenleaf started the widespread interest being shown by many in uniting all aspects of one's life, but it can be rightly claimed that servant leadership provides many actual and potential Syncretists with the opportunity to integrate beliefs and practices.

The Systematizers (or architects and quantity surveyors)

The Systematizers set out to plan and build theoretical and applied models of servant leadership, subsequently measuring its impact on individuals, teams and businesses, and demonstrating its contribution to wider organizational concepts and practice.

In many ways, the Systematizers are not a separate emphasis at all; they are a group of academics and practitioners who have attempted to bring together concepts and practices concerning servant leadership into coherent models through a series of codifications and distinguishing features, in much the same way as systematic theologians developed an integrated statement of belief for parts of the church.

However, the very act of engaging in model-making or codification is a distinguishing feature that justifies grouping them together. The Systematizers believe servant leadership 'requires rigorous quantitative and qualitative research. As the current literature on servant leadership is filled with anecdotal evidence, empirical research is critically needed to test and validate these various questions and to create further predictions and hypotheses' (Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002) – and with commendable vigour they set about their task.

Typically, but not exclusively, quantitative analysis is undertaken by the *quantity surveyors*, who delight in statistical analyses to determine the length, breadth, height and depth of the impact of each and every aspect of servant leadership principles (for example, see Hebert, 2006). By means of their commitment to statistical enquiry – through correlation coefficients, significance tests, hierarchical regression analysis and the like – valuable information and insights are obtained, providing scope for others to pursue even further quantitative analysis.

Again typically, but not exclusively, *architects* qualitatively undertake the creation of codifications and, given the metaphysical nature of Greenleaf's work, their codifications of the conceptual and practical nature of servant leadership into sets of precepts is vital.

The codifiers and modellers (and, often, the functions of *architect* and *quantity surveyor* fuse into one person) have used their knowledge and expertise to identify servant-leader characteristics and the following examples, presented alphabetically and taken from qualitative and quantitative work, are among the best known:

AMCA's eleven defining qualities (2008)
Autry's five ways of being (2004)
Barbuto and Wheeler's five factors (2006)
Daft's four precepts (1999)
Frick's ten skills and capacities (2004)
Keith's seven key practices (2008)
Laub's six key areas (2008)
Patterson's seven virtues (2003)
Sipe and Frick's seven pillars (2009)
Spears's ten characteristics (1995)
van Dierendonck and Nuijten's eight dimensions (in press)
Wheatley's seven keys (2004)

Some question the need for the development of ever more codifications, while others celebrate the proliferation of interpretations as an

indication of the growing interest in servant leadership, praising this organic rather than mechanistic development. Perhaps a coalescing of the lists may happen over time, becoming a generally agreed set of characteristics.

The Systematizers have at least one thing in common with the Syncretists: they bring together different elements of belief and practice to establish a 'whole person', or the identification of an all-embracing model, thereby uniting elements of servant leadership.

Welcoming opportunities, addressing tensions

At this point in the chapter, it would be understandable if the first-time reader of a servant leadership book exclaimed: 'It seems to mean all things to all people! It appears you can manipulate it to make it fit whatever you want it to fit; to fit whatever you happen to believe.' This is why we return to the essential three servant leadership questions identified at the start of this chapter – definition, application and contribution – and reflect on the opportunities and tensions that might arise in pursuing one or more emphasis, while remaining true to servant leadership's central principles.

Servant leadership may well have few established rules and regulations, but the principles lying at its heart are crucial and non-negotiable: the greatest of these principles is the commitment to being a servant. Everything else follows from that conscious decision. It may appear pedantry, but what separates servant leadership from every other discussion of leadership is that, above all else, it concerns *servants* who lead and not *leaders* who serve; servant leadership must never be relegated to one among many descriptions of leadership, ignoring the fundamental and all-pervading concept of servanthood. From that fundamental starting point – a servant who leads – it is then possible to appreciate how servant-leader behaviour can be manifest through different emphases, thereby recognizing personal preferences and one's organizational environment. Servant leadership is not *all things to all people*, the non-negotiable commitment to being a servant (among other things) makes that clear, but it is sensitive to different styles and different requirements.

With the welcomed increasing popularity of servant leadership, some misinterpretations are inevitable and should encourage advocates to explain further its central concepts, and its benefits to individuals, organizations and wider society. The challenge is to explain servant leadership in terms that enable practitioners to discover how this concept might be applied within their organizational settings. This is one reason

for identifying seven different emphases in this chapter, and recognizing that reactions to them may differ – that opportunities and tensions do exist. The Poets may appear reasonable, or outlandish; the Managerialists may resonate with the harsh realities of business life, or appear a tad unenlightened; the Egalitarians may seem faithful to the core message, or out of touch with reality; the Peripherals may be seen as sincere, but perhaps oblivious to the full meaning of their words; the Discreet understand business sensitivities, or are unduly reticent; the Syncretists, rightly or wrongly (according to one's viewpoint), seek authenticity in all aspects of life; and the Systematizers endeavour to make servant leadership more understandable and accessible. These emphases show there is more than one way to be a servant-leader: it is possible to emphasize different, yet complementary, aspects and remain faithful to its precepts. That is one of servant leadership's inherent fascinations.

Greenleaf's contribution must never be condensed to a set of dos and don'ts. There is a need to accept that his work was never intended as a simple step-by-step guide but, rather, as a fundamental challenge for everyone to consider and apply within their environment and circumstances, remaining true to the cardinal and non-negotiable principles but allowing different emphases or approaches to guide. This is one reason why researchers and practitioners need to produce further case studies – particularly on application and contribution, based on the experience of companies (and commendably, the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership website contains such examples).

Robert Greenleaf may have avoided prescription in his writings, but exploring and developing the concept must be accompanied with safeguards; otherwise servant leadership could become merely the latest fashionable thinking or, worse still, a trendy shibboleth or shorthand for unfocused views. Servant leadership is not an add-on extra; it is a fundamentally different way of being that strikes at the very heart of everything one believes and practises, in all aspects of life. Servant leadership runs deep: it is not something superficial to be taken up and then put down when someone becomes tired of it, or when some other topic is in vogue. There has to be a commitment to the long haul; otherwise, a person has not understood that becoming a servant-leader changes one's whole approach to life. Being a servant-leader may be a challenge, but being a half-hearted or easily distracted servant-leader is not an option.

4
Demystifying Servant Leadership

Sen Sendjaya

The servant leadership approach is the less travelled road of leadership. In the final analysis, it is not an outward leadership behaviour or skill, but an internal character of the heart. It is a matter of 'being' rather than 'doing'. This character-focused approach is what makes servant leadership distinct from other leadership models, and explains the proliferation of empirical studies in the field since the turn of the millennium. Complementing the explosion of empirically rigorous studies in servant leadership is the increase of anecdotal evidences of servant leadership practices in high-performing companies reported in the media and popular press. Typically, companies such as Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Ritz-Carlton, TDIndustries, Synovus, and ServiceMaster are cited (Gergen, 2001; see also Chapter 11). While these corporate practices can be downplayed as isolated cases, as critics may suggest, servant leadership has spurred curiosity beyond the capacity of scholars to keep pace, either theoretically or empirically.

This chapter begins with a brief review of servant leadership as a holistic and multidimensional approach to leadership that encompasses the rational, relational, ethical, emotional, and spiritual sides of both leaders and followers. What follows is a discussion on the most common arguments erected against the whole notion of servant leadership. During the course of conducting servant leadership research, executive workshops, and classroom training over the last 10 years, I have received considerable feedback and numerous inputs that have been very useful for clarifying my own thinking on the concept. Many of these comments came from journal editors, reviewers, executives, and students, to whom I am heavily indebted. Some of their arguments against servant leadership were so carefully constructed that they delineate the boundary conditions for servant leadership. Some, however,

39

were logically derived from a lack of interpretation or from misinterpretation of the concept.

The purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to provide a conceptual clarity on the key contentious issues associated with servant leadership which, to the best of my knowledge, have not been discussed in sufficient depth, given the rush to present the necessary empirical evidences in support of the construct. In the course of writing this chapter, I selected only the more robust issues and excluded the peripheral.

The multidimensional nature of servant leadership

Researchers have measured servant leadership under different frameworks, bearing in mind that the absence of accurate measures hinders any scientifically valid progress in any field of inquiry. To date, there are at least half a dozen servant leadership measures that have been developed, validated, and (to a lesser extent) published (for a review, see Sendjaya *et al.*, 2008; see also Chapter 14). Clearly, there is a convergence among all measures in the inclusion of servanthood (i.e. willingness to serve others) as a fundamental dimension of servant leadership, albeit the different terminologies used. However, its idiosyncratic attributes go beyond the dimensions of servanthood. For example, the intent to serve others does not naturally emerge; neither does it happen in a vacuum. Instead, it is driven by the leaders' spiritual insights and humility (Graham, 1991). Equally important is that both the ends and means of the acts of serving are exercised in accordance with moral and ethical principles. As I argued elsewhere, spirituality and morality-ethics are the *sine qua non* of servant leadership. The links between servant leadership and spirituality (Fairholm, 1997; Korac-Kakabadse *et al.*, 2002) and between servant leadership and morality or ethics (Graham, 1991, 1995; Yukl, 1990) have been well-documented in extant literature. In fact, without its spiritual and moral-ethical emphases, there is nothing new about servant leadership that has not been addressed in existing leadership approaches such as transformational leadership or authentic leadership. Hence, the inclusion of the spiritual and moral-ethical dimensions reflects a more comprehensive construct of servant leadership than existing leadership measures.

To give an overview of a measure that reflects this position, the six dimensions of servant leadership behaviour outlined in Sendjaya *et al.* (2008) are briefly outlined in Figure 4.1. The first dimension, *Voluntary Subordination*, signifies the conviction of the leader to renounce the superior status and privileges attached to leadership in order to embrace greatness by way of servanthood. Servant-leaders are more conscious of their
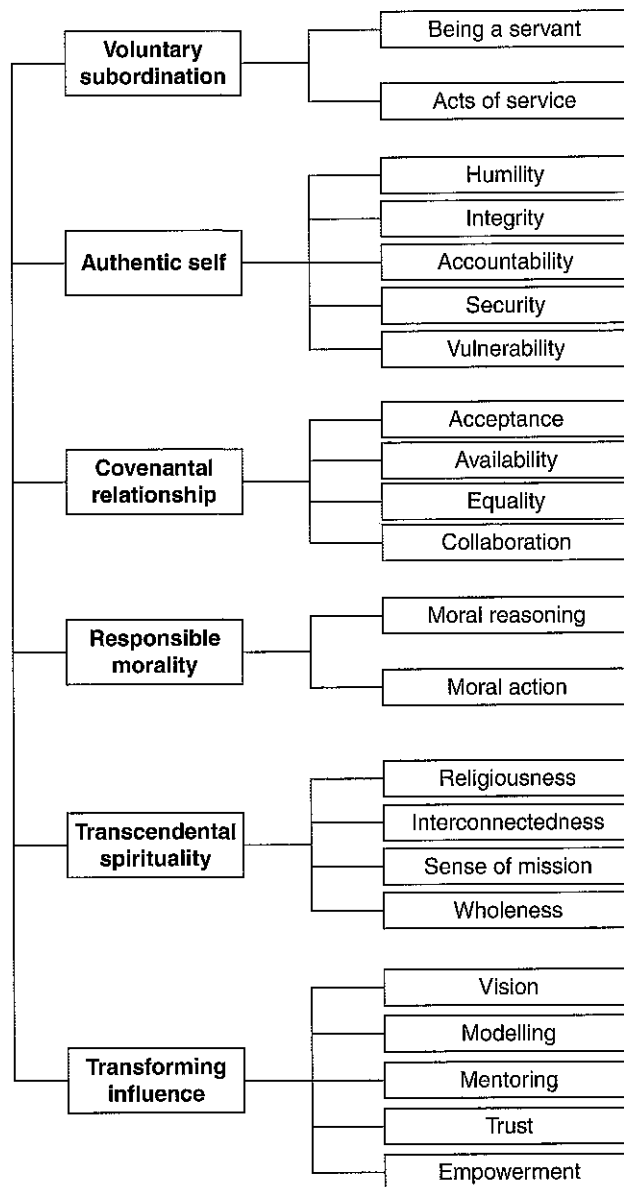
Figure 4.1 Theoretical framework used to categorize the qualitative data

responsibilities than their rights, readily taking up opportunities to serve others whenever there is a legitimate need without seeking acknowledgement or compensation (Blanchard and Hodges, 2003). The voluntary nature of this subordination is a reflection of the leader's strength of character, which simultaneously becomes a source from which the leader draws her or his inner satisfaction.

The second dimension, *Authentic Self,* signifies the authenticity of servant-leaders whose lives are marked with humility, integrity, accountability, vulnerability, and a secured sense of self. Knowing and being who they really are, which is critical in leader-follower relationships (Autry, 2001; DePree, 1989; George, 2003; Guillory, 1997), servant-leaders practise what they preach, admit their mistakes and limitations, and are not defensive when their decisions and actions are questioned.

Covenantal Relationship, the third dimension, characterizes the profound, genuine relationships servant-leaders build with people who work with and around them (DePree, 1989). As opposed to contractual, tit-for-tat relationships that are often at risk whenever there are disagreements or conflicts (Van Dyne *et al.,* 1994), covenant-based relationships last, as leaders and followers share common values, mutual trust, open-ended commitment, and concern for the welfare of the other party (Bromley and Busching, 1988). Quality leader-follower relationships are also saturated with moral and spiritual values (Ciulla, 1995; Graham, 1991), which makes the servant leadership approach distinctive (as captured in the dimensions of *Responsible Morality* and *Transcendental Spirituality*). Servant-leaders not only ensure that both the ends they seek and the means they employ are morally legitimized, thoughtfully reasoned, and ethically justified (Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002), they also encourage other people to behave in the same way through moral reasoning, thereby elevating the morality of both the leaders and the led (Graham, 1995; Yukl, 1990). Similarly, servant-leaders are attuned to spiritual values, in that their lives are driven by a sense of higher purpose, direction, meaning, and fitness between the internal self and the external world, all of which they also nurture in the lives of others (Fairholm, 1997; Korac-Kakabadse *et al.,* 2002).

Finally, through the sharing of vision, personal examples, unreserved trust, mentoring, and empowerment, servant-leaders transform their constituents in multiple dimensions – emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually (Autry, 2001; Greenleaf, 1977). This dimension, *Transforming Influence,* suggests that the profound change takes effect, first and foremost, in the development and growth of members of the organizations instead of the financial bottom-line of the organizations.

Evidences for multidimensionality

A decade of research into these six dimensions suggests that servant leadership behaviour is a holistic behavioural cluster that is not meant to be practised in a piecemeal fashion. The holistic construct signifies the selfless life orientation that a servant-leader possesses. Empirical investigations (for example, the chi-square difference test) revealed that the six dimensions were found to be empirically distinguishable, each representing unique, though related, latent dimensions. These studies confirm the multidimensional nature of the behaviour of the servant-leader as captured in the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale (SLBS) (see Sendjaya *et al.*, 2008). The relatively high correlations between dimensions support this conclusion. For example, the high correlation between *Transforming Influence* and *Transcendental Spirituality* suggest that servant-leaders' efforts to transform people into what they are capable of becoming is closely associated with their spiritual conviction (Fairholm, 1997). Practically, this finding implies that servant-leaders *draw the best out of others* and *contribute to their personal and professional growth* (*Transforming Influence*) as a way to *encourage other people to express their whole self in the workplace* and because they are *driven by a sense of higher calling* (*Transcendental Spirituality*). This finding confirms Graham's (1991) contention that the source of a servant-leader's influence is one that is spiritual, and is not based on personality, competency, or hierarchical position.

The boundary conditions of servant leadership

The following section discusses several key issues raised by journal editors, reviewers, and practitioners against the concept and practice of servant leadership. I will briefly outline the essence of the arguments then provide my thoughts and responses to these arguments.

Are servant-leaders doormats?

> Given the altruistic motive with which servant-leaders serve others, would they not be treated as doormats and their altruism misused or abused?

The concept of accountability embedded in servant leadership sheds light on this concern. Block (1993) argued that servant-leaders view themselves as stewards who hold themselves accountable for the well-being and growth of the people they serve. It is, however, relatively easy these days to cite accountability merely as an exercise in compliance. Marshall

(1991: p. 72) distinguished between accepting accountability as a matter of reactive obligation and proactive or voluntary choice, and maintained that servant-first leaders choose the latter as 'they are accustomed to being answerable to their performance'. As a natural expression of their true servanthood, servant-leaders seek to be accountable not only to the people they serve, but also to others (for example, a board of directors, other stakeholders of an organization, the leader's personal core values and moral integrity). Hence, the accountability of servant-leaders towards their followers is not absolute, in that servant-leaders will be subservient to followers' demands. On the other hand, servant-leaders' accountability to their followers is tempered by other accountability structures and relationships into which they consciously put themselves. The interplay between accountability and service in these relationships is perhaps best captured by the phrase 'I am your servant, but you are not my master', as outlined in the following remark made by a Director of a not-for-profit organization in an interview I conducted in 2003:

> Call it 'I am your servant, but you are not my master' ... If you think servant leadership is just giving the people what they want ... you are actually missing the generous nature of true servant leadership. Your relative accountability is to the people you work with and who work for you. So you do have a relative accountability then, but it's not absolute.

Is servant leadership for religious people?

> Is it true that servant leadership has such a heavy religious overtone that it excludes people who do not associate themselves with certain religions or religious beliefs?

A cursory review of extant literature reveals that it is typically linked to some religious teaching. The majority of publications have both explicit and implicit links to the Judeo-Christian theology, although many emerging publications also link servant leadership to other religious teachings. Robert Greenleaf, dubbed the grandfather of servant leadership, was a Quaker but drew heavily on Hesse's *Journey to the East*, steeped in ancient Eastern religious mysticism, as well as Carl Jung's atheistic notion of self-consciousness. Greenleaf's conceptualization therefore reflects a syncretic view that merges two discrete theological presuppositions and traditions. It is important to note, however, that

servant leadership has also found support from non-religious beliefs (see, for example, Fry, 2003; Hicks, 2002). Kurth (2003), for instance, argued that the concept of service is taught by all major religions (for example, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism; see Chapter 5) and by non-religious philosophies (for example, moral philosophy, Siddha yoga, Taoism). To illustrate, one of Immanuel Kant's (1964: pp. 32–3) famous categorical imperatives strongly captures the most important tenet of servant leadership: 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end'.

In summary, practising servant leadership does not require one to subscribe to a particular religion or religious belief. For those of some religious persuasion, it emerges from an internal conviction that the servant-leader is a servant of a higher being or power and, in obedient gratitude to that higher being or power, they serve other people. For those with spiritual orientation but no religious attachment, the motivation to practise servant leadership comes from not a higher being, but from a set of core values, ideals or causes that partly or wholly define their lives and give meaning and significance.

Which comes first: influence or service?

> One of the biggest conundrums in the servant leadership field is its underlying influence process. If the hallmark of servant-leaders is their deliberate choice to serve others and desire to serve first, does that signify followership rather than leadership? If the primary focus of servant-leaders is to serve, how does a servant exert influence over others with the authority expected of a leader? Does the *servant first* step mean that someone began as a servant who served a leader and/or team members, and subsequently rose to leadership in a unique way?

Servant leadership stems from a heartfelt conviction and a desire to transform other people with moral courage and spiritual insights into what they are capable of becoming. In leader–follower relationships, the leaders act as stewards – that is, they consider their followers as people who have been entrusted to them to be elevated to their better selves and to fulfil their potential. Followers tend to respond well to servant-leaders because they have proven themselves trustworthy as servants. And since leadership is more 'caught' than 'taught', followers themselves will

be transformed into servant-leaders. The transformational effect in followers is achieved through what is often perceived as a counterintuitive way – that is, servant-leaders willingly sacrificing their needs and wants in order to serve others, instead of serving their own selfish aims by sacrificing other people. As a leadership approach that is other-oriented, rather than leader-centred, effectiveness is therefore measured by the holistic development of both the leaders and followers.

The desire to serve others does not preclude the servant-leader from the responsibility of exerting influence. While servant-leaders seek to transform others to be more servant-like, there is a higher purpose that both the leaders and servants mutually seek to accomplish. Servant-leaders try to support others in achieving that higher purpose by way of service. Service, therefore, is a means by which to try to role model ideal behaviours and values aligned with this higher purpose: servant-leaders seek, first, to influence, and choose the path of servanthood to accomplish that task.

The paradox, therefore, is not between leadership and service but, rather, lies in the ordering of service and influence. Which comes first: service or influence? I believe that servant-leaders have in mind a series of influences to which they wish to expose the followers. In this sense, servant-leaders are visionary individuals who have a clear idea of the kind of leaders that they expect their followers to become. This vision will, in the final analysis, benefit the followers and, perhaps, benefit the leaders. If servant-leaders first serve others, would their acts of service be driven mainly by needs and aspirations at an individual level and marked by the absence of a greater purpose or unifying principle? In my view, servant-leaders offer others unconditional and unqualified acceptance, thereby transforming them into their true selves. Just as parents love their children unconditionally but are committed to helping them learn and grow to realize their full potential, servant-leaders accept followers as they are but seek to transform them to be better servant-leaders. It is therefore accurate to conclude that there is a higher purpose that servant-leaders pursue – that of turning followers into servant-leaders to achieve this, they employ service to try to role model these behaviours. Hence, servant-leaders can choose to serve others in an attempt to model ideal behaviours, but the intent remains to influence someone to see the vision of the greater good, or at least that leader's interpretation of the greater good. It is therefore appropriate to view servant leadership as a dyadic theory where there is a unique one-to-one relationship between leader and follower.

Is there a real difference to the bottom line?

> Perhaps the most common criticism against servant
> leadership is that, given its focus on followers' needs
> and development, it will not positively contribute to
> the bottom line – at least, not directly.

This view is largely derived from the commonly known observation that, in comparison with other leadership approaches, servant-leaders are more likely to demonstrate the natural inclinations to serve the marginalized people and to set the following priorities in their leadership focus: first, followers; second, organizations; and, finally, themselves. On the basis of this assumption, one typically concludes that servant leadership does not contribute to the corporate performance as measured by the traditional financial indicators (for example, profit margin, earning per share, and so on).

This is a vital observation, and needs serious consideration by researchers. To date, we are yet to see published empirical evidence in support of those direct effects. However, preliminary evidence in support of the positive impacts of servant leadership on other (soft) measures of corporate performance are on the increase –for instance, trust in leaders, commitment, job satisfaction and the like. Empirical studies have shown that servant leadership behaviour contributes to building followers' trust in the leader (Joseph and Winston, 2005; Liden *et al.*, 2005). A more recent study confirmed that servant leadership is a significant predictor of trust with *Covenantal Relationship, Responsible Morality* and *Transforming Influence* as the key servant leadership behaviours significantly contributing to followers' trust in their leader (Sendjaya and Pekerti, in press). Followers who perceived high servant leadership behaviours in their leaders had significantly higher levels of trust compared with those who perceived low servant leadership behaviours in their leaders. The relevant behaviours that engender followers' trust in the leader are:

- articulating a shared vision that followers can identify with collectively
- setting a personal example
- appealing to commonly shared values
- demonstrating shared values
- open-ended commitment
- concern for the welfare of their followers
- engaging in moral dialogue to examine the ethics of the organization and of the leaders themselves.

These findings, and others, may provide a hint and possibly lead one to hypothesize that servant leadership has positive effects on the financial performance of an organization only on a long-term basis. Hence, the corporate context that encourages the culture of creating and maintaining short-term profits may run counter to the long-term orientation of servant leadership. In this light, it is therefore not too far-fetched to argue that, in the organizational contexts where more long-term perspectives and a balanced approach to performance (for example, triple bottom line) are adopted, servant leadership may better take root and flourish. Having said that, the calls for for-profit organizations not to be fixated on short-term profits, and to have a more balanced view of performance, will create space and opportunities for servant leadership to present itself as a viable alternative approach to leadership.

Is it really relevant?

> What transpires from the recent failures of leaders and the collapse of organizations across the globe is the limitation of performance-oriented leadership approaches that sacrifice people on the altar of profit and growth.

The unprecedented challenges that confront contemporary leaders today cannot be met with leadership approaches that regard people merely as units of production or expendable resources in a profit and loss statement. While such approaches may bring about impressive growth and 'performance beyond expectations', these results will not be sustainable in the long run, as the relational, ethical, emotional, and spiritual sides of followers – and, to a lesser extent, leaders – are neglected. Since servant leadership is an altruistic, holistic, ethical, spiritual, and relational approach to leadership, this leadership approach can be timely for organizations operating in the post-Enron world. While it is certainly not a panacea to the global epidemic of toxic leadership, an appreciation of the philosophy and spirit of servant leadership will help leaders and followers relate to each other in more meaningful and profound ways. Its moral and spiritual ideals, which guard leaders and followers from leadership pitfalls, make it a distinct approach to leadership.

The six dimensions of the SLBS (see Figure 4.1) may be particularly relevant for the holistic development of leaders. In fact, developing a holistic leadership intervention is worth considering in light of the ubiquity of toxic and destructive leaders playing major roles in recent

corporate scandals. While a myriad of leadership development programmes is easily accessible today, many of them are fixated on competency-based developmental areas at the expense of the character-based areas, which incorporate emotional, ethical, and spiritual dimensions. In the wake of morally flawed corporate leaders, the need to reflect, think through, and make moral decisions in ill-defined and ethically ambiguous environments cannot be overstated, as this will spell success or failure for the organizations and their stakeholders. The notion that the exercise of authority and power always entails ethical challenges must be permanently on the agenda for discussion. Further, leadership development programmes need to expose (potential) leaders to a range of situations, with the purpose of developing emotional, moral, and spiritual awareness or reasoning.

Servant-leaders produce multiplying effects in others as they turn those served into servant-leaders. When followers perceive that they are the recipients of the leaders' trust, they, in turn, are more likely to trust their leaders. And when leaders attribute followers' trust to themselves, they enhance their self-concept, which further reinforces the servant leadership behaviours of both the leaders and followers. Similarly, servant-leaders' readiness to serve first selflessly, as opposed to lead first, will be likely to result in followers' emulating self-sacrificing behaviours (Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1999). These multiplying effects signify the transforming influence of servant leadership.

What is distinctive about a servant leadership training programme?

> In comparison with other leadership training programmes, servant leadership training will have an emphasis on character as opposed to competency (leadership skills) or concept (leadership theories and models).

Since it is ultimately a reflection of the heart, training programmes are built on the assumption that what leaders do will flow from who they are, hence involving participants in re-examining their core values, life meaning and priorities, past and future trajectories, and so on. In addition, training programmes will cover emotional, spiritual, and moral-ethical training, which are delivered not as separate topics in and of themselves but, rather, as parts of the holistic nature of servant leadership. These components will, in fact, inform each and every topic in the training programme. For example, participants will learn

how to build and articulate a shared vision using emotionally, spiritually, and morally attractive approaches. By the end of the programme, it is expected that participants will have a conviction to lead ethically, selflessly, and compassionately and to influence others in their circles to do the same. Participants will also develop relevant skills – such as in-depth reflection, emotional sensitivity, moral analysis and others – which will help them critically evaluate their leadership decisions and actions. Further, training programmes do not aim to help participants behave in certain ways to boost followers' performance so much as to help them to build a genuine and lasting relationship with followers, which in the long-run will positively affect their performance.

Is it relevant cross-culturally?

> As with many other leadership theories, servant leadership was a US-centric theory, largely studied and practised by American companies. Given the vast differences that exist between the USA and the rest of the world in terms of national culture, is this theory applicable in non-US countries? The GLOBE study, for example, revealed that there are different perceptions of leadership effectiveness in each society (House *et al.*, 2004).

Chapter 10 provides a full overview of studies into servant leadership throughout the world. In addition to confirming the relevance of servant leadership outside the USA, these cross-cultural studies across and within cultures also demonstrated variations of servant leadership practices (Hale and Fields, 2007; Washington *et al.*, 2006). For example, African-American leaders exhibited more servant leadership behaviours in comparison with 'white leaders' in the USA (Washington *et al.*, 2006). This finding was somewhat expected, since African-Americans are strongly predisposed to kinship relationships that extend to the entire African-American community and, hence, highly value cooperation and interdependence. Another cross-cultural study exploring servant leadership in Ghana and the USA found respondents from Ghana experiencing servant leadership behaviours significantly less frequently than their American counterparts (Hale and Fields, 2007), which is largely due to the higher levels of power distance and collectivism in Ghanaian cultural practices.

A more recent study showed empirically that servant leadership is universally practised and accepted in Australia and Indonesia, but that

its practice would be moderated by culture (Pekerti and Sendjaya, 2010). In terms of the six-dimensions servant leadership framework (Sendjaya *et al.*, 2008), Australian leaders exhibited more behaviours associated with *Authentic Self*, while Indonesian leaders exhibited more behaviour associated with *Responsible Morality* and *Transforming Influence*. In contrast, we found no significant difference between Australian and Indonesian leaders' behaviours associated with *Voluntary Subordination*, *Covenantal Relationship*, and *Transcendental Spirituality* behaviours. The similarities in perceptions and practices found between Australian and Indonesian leaders can be explained by the similarities in certain values, such as equality and companionship for Australians, and community and mutual respect for Indonesians. At the same time, culture-specific differences found were also linked to leaders' and followers' societal profile and cultural identities, particularly on three of Hofstede's (1991) indices: power distance, individualism and masculinity.

Conclusion

This chapter outlines the multidimensional construct of servant leadership, and discusses the most common arguments raised against its concept and practice. While the list of arguments presented in this chapter is not exhaustive, they provide a snapshot of the current state of theoretical development of the servant leadership concept. Given the increasing rate of qualitative and quantitative studies that are currently being conducted across different continents, no doubt the construct will be further clarified and refined, which will help in establishing servant leadership as a best fitting model of leadership for future organizations.

Part II
Becoming the Servant-Leader