



## SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND TAKING CHARGE BEHAVIOR

### *The Moderating Role of Follower Altruism*

—DIRK VAN DIERENDONCK

The literature on servant-leadership (SL) advocates that the primary focus of servant-leaders is to meet the needs of others (Greenleaf 1977). Servant-leaders focus on developing employees to their fullest potential in areas of task effectiveness, community stewardship, self-motivation, and future leadership capabilities, and they provide vision and gain credibility and trust from followers (Farling, Stone, and Winston 1999). Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) described SL as including an altruistic calling, which is the motivation of leaders to place others' needs and interests ahead of their own, and organizational stewardship, which orients others toward benefiting and serving the community. Research has indeed shown that servant-leadership is related to a variety of followers' attitudes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior (Van Dierendonck 2011).

In this study, I will follow the operational definition of servant-leadership I was fortunate to help establish (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten 2011) through empirical methods. Nuijten and I developed a measure consisting of eight dimensions, including empowerment, accountability, humility, standing back, authenticity, forgiveness, courage, and stewardship. In essence, our focus on servant-leadership emphasizes that servant-leaders empower and develop people, are willing to retreat into the background and let others shine, hold followers accountable for their work, are willing to let bygones be bygones, dare to take risks, are willing to show what he or she stands for, have an openness to learn and a willingness to admit mistakes, and work for the good of the whole.

Given the encouraging results relating servant-leadership with organizational citizenship behavior, taking charge behavior was chosen as the operationalization of follower outcomes within this study. Taking charge behavior is that part of organizational citizenship behavior that focuses



on a proactive extra-role response. It emphasizes the willingness to challenge the current state and bring about constructive change (Morrison and Phelps 1999). It entails voluntary and constructive efforts on improving how the work is done, to correct faulty tasks and improve the status quo if the existing procedures and policies are inappropriate or inefficient. Theorizing and research by Smith et al. (1983) and Ehrhart (2004) have linked servant-leadership behavior to extra-role behavior. A leader serves as a role model for the people within the team and organization. Social psychological studies have shown that particularly pro-social behavior can be influenced by the social environment. The serving attitude of a servant-leadership approach with a focus on others and helping them grow is therefore likely to inspire followers to become more giving themselves and will encourage a positive, beneficial attitude toward the organizations. It can therefore be expected that servant-leadership behavior will encourage an authentic and care-based taking charge attitude because of a willingness to reciprocate.

An understudied area within the servant-leadership field is that of the influence of the personality or character traits of the follower on the effectiveness of servant-leadership. Most theories assume or at least silently give a nod to no differentiating effect in that servant-leadership is supposed to be effective for all to a similar extent. There is, however, ample reason to assume that this may not be the case. For example, early leadership theorizing by Shamir, House, and Arthur (1993) already addressed the potential role played by follower traits for leadership effectiveness. A work-related trait that may influence the effectiveness of servant-leadership behavior is altruism. Altruism refers to voluntary, intentional behavior focused on the benefit of another person without expecting external rewards or the avoidance of externally produced punishments (Rushton, Chrisjon, and Fekken 1981). It can be considered a morally advanced form of pro-social behavior (Chou 1966). It is an act for the other's sake as an end in itself, whereby the internal well-being or public recognition of the person showing altruistic behavior is of minor importance (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

Now, it may be argued that altruism in its pure form does not exist (Batson et al. 2002): that deep within, human beings are purely egoistic. Among biologists and psychologists, many hold the view that people only care for others to the extent that it affects their own welfare. The position of universal egoism is that everything we do, no matter how noble or



beneficial to others is directed toward the ultimate goal of self-benefit, in what might be called a Nietzschean interpersonal undercurrent. However, recent research seems to show that people may be more social than previously thought (Batson et al. 2002), that we are very capable of caring for others without a specific ego-based motive. Altruism has been positioned as part of agreeableness, which is one of the Big 5 personality traits. Agreeable people are in general sympathetic, generous, and eager to help others.

Servant-leadership theories place altruism in a central place for the leader. My basic argument here is that if a subordinate's basic attitude resonates with that of the leader, the leader's influence will be stronger. One of the tasks of a servant-leader is to encourage servant-leadership behavior within followers. It is likely that servant-leaders will gain stronger follower support for developing a servant attitude themselves if the leader's behavior resonates with the basic values of followers. This reasoning is related to theorizing around leadership as prototypically a dynamic and relational exchange (van Knippenberg 2011), that states that leaders are more effective if they are perceived to embody group identity. I propose that a similar process may play a role for the individual identity. That is, it is hypothesized that the relationship between servant-leadership and taking charge behavior will be stronger for followers who are more altruistic.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The cross-sectional data for this study were gathered through an online survey using the snowball technique. A first group of acquaintances was approached and asked to participate (approximately 50). Following, they were asked to send the interlink of the study to others who might be interested to participate (each person approached about 10 persons each). A total of 148 persons started filling out the survey. From this group, 99 filled out the survey completely. No incentive was offered for participating. The sample came from several sectors such as banking, entertainment, restaurants, energy utilities, and transportation. Of the participants, 52 percent were men and 48 percent were women; the mean age was 35.4 years ( $SD = 12.0$ ).



## Measures

The survey used a five-point Likert scale for all the measures, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Servant-leadership* was measured using the eight dimensions included in the Servant-leadership Survey developed by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). The eight dimensions are empowerment (7 items,  $\alpha = .84$ ), accountability (3 items,  $\alpha = .78$ ), standing back (3 items,  $\alpha = .75$ ), humility (5 items,  $\alpha = .86$ ), authenticity (4 items,  $\alpha = .77$ ), courage (2 items,  $\alpha = .43$ ), forgiveness (3 items,  $\alpha = .70$ ), and stewardship (3 items,  $\alpha = .72$ ).

*Altruism* was measured using the "Self-Report Altruism scale" (SRA; Rushton, Chrisjon, and Fekken 1981). Internal consistency was .82.

*Taking Charge* was measured with the 10 items of the subscale developed by Morrison and Phelps (1999). Internal consistency was .89.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and the correlations between the study variables. In order to detect these interaction effects, the independent variables were entered into the equation in two steps (cf. Aiken and West 1991). In the first step, the main effects were entered. In the second

Table 1.

*Means, standard deviations, and correlations between the study variables (N = 99).*

| Variables         | M    | SD  | 1.   | 2.   | 3.  | 4.  | 5.  | 6.   | 7.   | 8   | 9.  |
|-------------------|------|-----|------|------|-----|-----|-----|------|------|-----|-----|
| 1. Empowerment    | 3.65 | .64 |      |      |     |     |     |      |      |     |     |
| 2. Accountability | 3.85 | .61 | .44  |      |     |     |     |      |      |     |     |
| 3. Standing back  | 3.28 | .74 | .50  | .17  |     |     |     |      |      |     |     |
| 4. Humility       | 3.38 | .63 | .46  | .16  | .60 |     |     |      |      |     |     |
| 5. Authenticity   | 3.15 | .70 | .44  | .13  | .67 | .66 |     |      |      |     |     |
| 6. Courage        | 3.18 | .72 | .49  | .27  | .36 | .31 | .44 |      |      |     |     |
| 7. Forgiveness    | 4.25 | .74 | -.01 | -.41 | .19 | .23 | .20 | -.18 |      |     |     |
| 8. Stewardship    | 3.48 | .70 | .49  | .19  | .66 | .64 | .57 | .45  | .15  |     |     |
| 9. Altruism       | 2.70 | .48 | .10  | .14  | .13 | .25 | .25 | .12  | -.08 | .10 |     |
| 10. Taking Charge | 3.15 | .66 | .53  | .35  | .25 | .31 | .31 | .27  | -.10 | .19 | .28 |



Table 2.  
*Multiple regressions of servant-leadership and altruism on taking charge behavior.*

| Model R <sup>2</sup> -change   | I      | II     | III    |
|--------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1                              | .36*** | .20*** | .33*** |
| 2                              | .05    | .03*   | .03*   |
| Model 1                        |        |        |        |
| Servant-leadership, subscales  |        |        |        |
| Empowerment                    | .48*** |        | .53*** |
| Accountability                 | .10    |        |        |
| Standing back                  | -.03   |        |        |
| Humility                       | .10    |        |        |
| Authenticity                   | .10    |        |        |
| Courage                        | -.01   |        |        |
| Forgiveness                    | -.05   |        |        |
| Stewardship                    | -.17   |        |        |
| Servant-leadership, full scale |        | .34*** | -.05   |
| Altruism (followers)           | .19*   | .20*   | .22*   |
| Model 2                        |        |        |        |
| Servant-leadership * Altruism  |        | .18*   | .18*   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                 | .36    | .24    | .37    |

Note. Depicted are the standardized values for the full model.

step, the two-way interaction terms were entered. To avoid problems with multi-collinearity, the variables were centered around zero before calculating their cross-product terms.

I tested three models for a full insight into the way that the servant-leadership behavior of leaders and the altruistic attitude of followers was related to the taking charge behavior of followers. In the first model, the eight subscales of the SLS were kept as separate scores. This first step did result in a significant relation to taking charge behavior, which was due to a positive relation with empowerment. None of the interactions of the SLS subscales with altruism were significant. In the second model, the scores of the eight subscales of the SLS were averaged into one overall servant-leadership score. Now, the interaction between the overall servant-leadership estimate and altruism

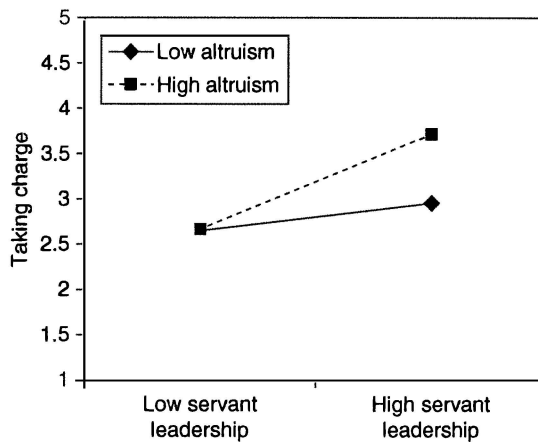


Figure 1. Servant-leadership and follower altruism on Taking Charge behavior

added significant variance to the prediction of the taking charge behavior. In the third model, the score of empowerment was added to the second model. This way, insight was given into the differentiated impact of the eight subscales and one overall servant-leadership score. Interestingly, both the main effect of empowerment and the interaction effect were significantly related to taking charge behavior. The overall servant-leadership score was no longer significant. The interaction is depicted in Figure 1.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to broaden the empirical evidence on how servant-leadership could encourage taking charge behavior of people within organizations. It contributes to the servant-leadership literature by showing that of the eight servant-leadership dimensions that are part of the SLS, empowerment is most strongly related to taking charge behavior. Being empowered by one's leader works out positive for employees and encourages them to be more proactive. However, with respect to the remaining aspects of servant-leadership, it takes an altruistic attitude among followers for servant-leadership behaviors to become more proactive. Although it is good to realize that this is only a small study with purely cross-sectional data, the results are intriguing. It encourages more research into the interrelatedness of servant-leader behavior and follower behavior, taking into account basic traits of the followers.



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