LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGIC STUDIES

A Servant Leadership Style: Principles, Practices, and Contemporary Relevance

Oluwakemi Folake Adeyinka[1], J. Ajibade Obadare[2], Toyin Sholade[1], Omolade Roseline Korede[1]

[1]Department of History (Leadership and Strategic Studies), Federal University Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria
[2]Department of History (Leadership and Security Studies), Federal University Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria

Published November 2026

Abstract

Effective leadership transcends mere management; it requires the ability to enable team members to reach their highest potential while advancing organisational goals. Among the various leadership philosophies, servant leadership first coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970 offers a distinctive, ethically grounded approach that prioritizes the growth and well-being of people. This paper provides a comprehensive examination of servant leadership, including its definition, core characteristics, guiding principles, advantages, limitations, and real-world exemplars. The paper also compares servant leadership with traditional, authoritarian, participative, and bureaucratic leadership styles. It concludes that servant leadership, while not without challenges, fosters trust, innovation, and long-term organisational success.

Keywords: ethical leadership; leadership styles; organisational leadership; servant leadership

1 Introduction

Leadership is essential in every sphere of human endeavour: homes, schools, business organisations, government, and public or private associations. Leadership is the action of leading and guiding a group of people or an organisation. More precisely, leadership involves influencing, motivating, and enabling others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of their organisation (Chegg, 2024). It transforms day-to-day activities to increase overall efficacy.

A true leader does more than manage others; they inspire and motivate their team for the good of the organisation. According to Jenn (2024), true leaders demonstrate vision and courage, charting new territories and breaking new ground. McPheat (2024) notes that Elon Musk's leadership style is primarily transformational; he sets ambitious goals but also listens to team members and allows them a voice in decision-making.

Leadership styles have evolved considerably in response to changing organisational dynamics. One prominent emerging philosophy emphasizes service, ethics, and value-driven approaches for effectively guiding people toward shared goals. This paper focuses specifically on servant leadership, offering a detailed analysis and a range of examples.

2 Defining servant leadership

The phrase "servant leadership" was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in his 1970 essay *The Servant as Leader*. Greenleaf argued that servant leadership begins with the natural desire to serve; a servant

leader is first a servant (Pathak, 2024). The primary goal of a servant leader is the growth and well-being of the people they lead.

Gomez (2022) observes that successful servant leaders possess a genuine desire to serve employees while also being effective, charismatic decision-makers who set clear expectations. Stojkovski (2023) notes that servant leadership appears somewhat contradictory: after all, leaders are powerful people who exert influence. However, the theory successfully blends serving and leading, challenging mainstream outlooks and offering a fresh perspective.

Kenton (2024) describes servant leadership as a philosophy whereby an individual interacts with others—whether in a management or fellow employee capacity—to achieve authority rather than power. It is a management style focused on the team's growth and well-being, putting their needs first. This approach is important in business because it creates a work environment where employees at all levels feel respected.

3 Core characteristics of servant leadership

Scholars have proposed different versions of the servant leadership model, but the general view remains close to Greenleaf's original ideas. According to Stojkovski (2023), the key characteristics are:

Accountability. Accountability is the gold standard of effective leaders. It entails following through on commitments and showing others they can rely on the leader to deliver on responsibilities and promises. Accountable leaders take responsibility for their actions, consistently deliver results, and inspire accountability in others.

Involving and consulting others. Servant leadership is not about being a one-person show. It emphasizes teamwork, collaboration, and ensuring everyone is involved in the decision-making process.

Putting others first. Good servant leaders express appreciation creatively—even through simple kind words. Such gestures contribute significantly to building a strong, loyal, and unified working community.

Ethical behaviour. Servant leaders use personal values such as integrity and honesty as guideposts to do the right thing and fulfill obligations. Their conduct establishes a benchmark for others, compelling ethical action and communication.

Fostering growth and success. Servant leaders give followers a sense of purpose and value their effort and expertise. They foster sustainable growth in an environment where everyone has the support they need to thrive.

Empowerment. Servant leaders deliberately empower employees to work on goals aligned with organisational aspirations. They provide a higher sense of capability and competency, including the ability to make autonomous decisions regarding tasks.

Generating value. Servant leaders turn work into a meaningful journey. Empowered and guided employees become fulfilled and happy, making this model useful for companies seeking to increase profits and value.

4 Principles of a servant leader

Servant leadership is distinguished by several guiding principles:

Listening. Servant leaders communicate effectively not only because they speak well but because they listen—often first. They validate the feelings of others by adopting a generally acceptable viewpoint.

Empathy. Empathy involves walking metaphorically in someone else's shoes and learning about every situation from all angles before reaching a decision. Servant leaders seek impartial solutions that strengthen their team.

Healing. According to Greenleaf, healing refers to a leader's desire to help followers overcome personal and professional hurdles through mentoring, coaching, and discussions. This pursuit allows opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Awareness. Self-awareness helps servant leaders navigate ethical dilemmas, power dynamics, and different values. It enables them to see circumstances from an interconnected perspective and serves as an invaluable problem-solving tool.

Persuasion. Servant leaders engage in persuasive communication rather than coercing others. They are simultaneously reasonable and empathetic in conversation.

Foresight. Foresight refers to how servant leaders consider past and present situations to make sound decisions for the future. Without foresight, Greenleaf believed, leaders lose the capacity to confidently guide others to success.

Commitment to the growth of people. Regardless of anyone's current skill level, servant leaders firmly believe that everyone can grow and change for the better.

5 Pros of servant leadership

The advantages of servant leadership include the following:

1. Well-defined characteristics of success; builds deeper, trust-based relationships.
2. Encourages innovation, curiosity, and creativity.
3. Develops a people-focused culture; ensures decisions are made in the best interests of the company.
4. By serving employees, you serve the target audience.
5. High level of internal staff growth and development of future leaders.
6. Boosts morale across teams; leaders earn respect from team members.
7. Employees feel more valued and appreciated in the workplace.

6 Cons of servant leadership

No leadership style is without flaws. Potential drawbacks include:

1. **Undermining managerial authority:** prioritizing employees' needs can backfire if high expectations and clear boundaries are not set.
2. **Difficulty balancing individual and organisational needs:** over-prioritizing staff needs over organisational goals can be counterproductive. Leaders who avoid criticism or upsetting followers may refrain from tough choices or constructive feedback.

3. **Demotivating some employees:** Servant leaders inclined to resolve problems immediately may repeatedly finish tasks employees could not complete. This can lead to slacking, as employees believe the manager will always solve any problem without negative consequences.

7 Examples of servant leadership

Several renowned and contemporary leaders exemplify servant leadership:

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. King famously said, "Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve." He advocated for equality by emphasizing moral standards and bringing attention to the well-being of underrepresented communities.

Nelson Mandela. Mandela served his people against colonizers, sacrificing much of his life in prison to stand for democracy and justice.

Winston Churchill. Churchill led the Allies in WWII, putting everything he had into defeating Germany. He is credited as an inspirational servant leader.

John F. Kennedy. President Kennedy spoke the famous words: "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country."

Chief Obafemi Awolowo. As leader of Nigeria's Action Group political party and the first indigenous Premier of Western Nigeria, Awolowo campaigned for developmental change, implementing free primary education and child healthcare across the Western Region.

Dr. (Mrs.) Rahila Ahmadu. A former Director of the National Secretariat of Nigerian Legislatures, Dr. Ahmadu retired from the National Assembly. She is described as hardworking, meticulous, committed, and empathetic. Colleagues testify that she gave every staff member a sense of belonging and advanced those who worked with her. She remains sought after in various fora.

8 Comparing servant leadership with other leadership styles

Drawing from Upskillist (n.d.) and Ramakrishnan (2022), servant leadership is compared with other leadership styles in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of servant leadership with other leadership styles.

Leadership style	Key feature	Contrast with servant leadership
Traditional	Leader is central; employees support the leader's goals	Servant leadership puts others' needs first
Authoritarian (autocratic)	Individual authority over all decisions; limited member involvement (e.g. Adolf Hitler)	Directly opposite; servant leadership empowers and consults
Participative (democratic)	Team participation aids goal achievement	Similar goals but not identical; servant leadership prioritizes service over process
Bureaucratic	Relies on established rules and procedures; resistant to change	Servant leadership listens, shows empathy, and adapts

9 Conclusion

The servant leader is truly unique. Unlike stereotypical views of leaders as tough and strict, the servant leader is patient and empathetic. They genuinely strive to create environments where people

can flourish. Their most important daily consideration is how to make others happier and better. They exhibit empathy, listen before speaking, and make right judgments.

This may involve personal sacrifices for the team, taking time to help others map career paths, or arranging extra training for underperforming employees. Examples abound from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, and Chief Obafemi Awolowo to contemporary figures like Dr. (Mrs.) Rahila Ahmadu. Servant leadership is most rewarding, as its works speak long after leaders are gone.

Leadership may be acquired through leadership development programs, which include rigorous study and practice to generate, develop, and strengthen leadership abilities. These programs help demonstrate the enduring importance of leadership.

References

[1] Chegg (2024). Question: Which of the following is the most accurate definition of leadership? *Chegg*. https://www.chegg.com

[2] Gomez AL (2022). What is servant leadership and how can it empower your team? *BetterUp*. https://www.betterup.com

[3] Jenn (2024). 8 characteristics of a true leader. *Indeed*.

[4] Kenton W (2024). Servant leadership: characteristics, pros & cons, example. *Investopedia*. https://www.investopedia.com

[5] McPheat S (2024). Elon Musk leadership style explained. *Management Training Specialists*. https://www.mtdtraining.com

[6] Pathak A (2024). Servant leadership: definition, examples, characteristics. *Vantage Circle*. https://www.vantagecircle.com

[7] Ramakrishnan M (2022). Discovering your leading style: a guide to 8 types of leadership. *Emeritus*. https://emeritus.org

[8] Stojkovski M (2023). Servant leadership: qualities, characteristics, and examples. *Pumble*. https://pumble.com

[9] Upskillist (n.d.). 5 leadership styles with examples. *Upskillist*. https://www.upskillist.pro