

# A Systematic Literature Review of Servant Leadership Theory in Organizational Contexts

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**Abstract** A new research area linked to ethics, virtues, and morality is servant leadership. Scholars are currently seeking publication outlets as critics debate whether this new leadership theory is significantly distinct, viable, and valuable for organizational success. The aim of this study was to identify empirical studies that explored servant leadership theory by engaging a sample population in order to assess and synthesize the mechanisms, outcomes, and impacts of servant leadership. Thus, we sought to provide an evidence-informed answer to how does servant leadership work, and how can we apply it? We conducted a systematic literature review (SLR), a methodology adopted from the medical sciences to synthesize research in a systematic, transparent, and reproducible manner. A disciplined screening process resulted in a final sample population of 39 appropriate studies. The synthesis of these empirical studies revealed: (a) there is no consensus on the definition of servant leadership; (b) servant leadership theory is being investigated across a variety of contexts, cultures, and themes; (c) researchers are using multiple measures to explore servant leadership; and (d) servant leadership is a viable leadership theory that helps organizations and improves the well-being of followers. This study contributes to the development of servant leadership

theory and practice. In addition, this study contributes to the methodology for conducting SLRs in the field of management, highlighting an effective method for mapping out thematically, and viewing holistically, new research topics. We conclude by offering suggestions for future research.

**Keywords** Leadership · Leadership theory · Servant leadership · Systematic literature review

## Introduction

Leadership is one of the most comprehensively researched social influence processes in the behavioral sciences. This is because the success of all economic, political, and organizational systems depends on the effective and efficient guidance of the leaders of these systems (Barrow 1977). A critical factor to understanding the success of an organization, then, is to study its leaders. Leadership is a skill used to influence followers in an organization to work enthusiastically towards goals specifically identified for the common good (Barrow 1977; Cyert 2006; Plsek and Wilson 2001). Great leaders create a vision for an organization, articulate the vision to the followers, build a shared vision, craft a path to achieve the vision, and guide their organizations into new directions (Banutu-Gomez and Banutu-Gomez 2007; Kotter 2001). According to Schneider (1987), the most important part in building an organization with a legacy of success is the people in it, which includes the followers (i.e., employees and volunteers) as well as the leaders. Leadership theories attempt to explain and organize the complexity of the nature of leadership and its consequences (Bass and Bass 2008). Over the years, some leadership scholars have called attention to the implicit connection between ethics and leadership. A burgeoning new research area and leadership theory that

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