



EMERALD POINTS

SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Leading with Empathy and Purpose

**DONNIE ADAMS
DAVID GURR
RYAN DUNN
XUELING FENG**



SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

This book provides an innovative analysis of contemporary servant-leadership in new and significant directions. With a profound focus on educational organizations, the authors demonstrate how servant-leaders make a difference in the world of education and beyond. Well-grounded in the seminal writings of Robert K. Greenleaf, this book also provides a powerful connection between servant-leadership and diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Three cheers for Donnie Adams, David Gurr, Ryan Dunn, and Xueling Feng for their creation of this remarkable work. It is a gem of a book.

—*Larry C. Spears*, Author-Editor and Servant-Leadership Scholar,
Gonzaga University; Senior Advisory Editor,
The International Journal of Servant-Leadership;
and CEO of The Spears Center for Servant-Leadership

Starting from an overview of academic research on servant leadership from psychology and business, Adams and colleagues masterfully demonstrate with numerous examples how servant leadership benefits educational organizations. Many case studies illustrate the way in which servant leadership in school settings help bring out the full potential of students and teachers through listening, empathy, and empowerment of all stakeholders regardless of their individual characteristics or cultural background. The book serves as a practical guide for leaders and educators seeking to develop servant leadership skills.

—*Professor Robert C. Liden*, University of Illinois at Chicago;
Trustee on the Center for Servant Leadership Board of Directors
and Chair of the Greenleaf Scholars Program

This important book recognises the growing importance of leadership as a relational activity, intended to support professional practice and student learning. The focus on servant leadership is timely and helpful for scholars, practitioners and policymakers.

—*Professor Tony Bush*, University of Nottingham, UK;
President and a Trustee Board member of the
British Educational Leadership Society (BELMAS)

Discover the transformative power of servant leadership in education with *Servant Leadership in Educational Organisations: Leading with Empathy and Purpose*. This insightful collection offers practical strategies, real-world case studies, and a holistic framework that connects leadership principles to equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging. Designed by a team of expert editors for current and aspiring educational leaders, the book emphasises empathy, humility, and ethical decision-making to build trust and organisational effectiveness. If you're looking to empower yourself to lead with purpose, nurture growth, and create positive change within your educational community, this book is for you.

—*Professor Allan Walker*, The Education University of Hong Kong;
Adjunct Research Chair Professor of International Educational
Leadership and Senior Advisor of The Joseph Lau Luen Hung Charitable
Trust Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change (APCLC)

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SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATIONS: LEADING WITH EMPATHY AND PURPOSE

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2025

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83662-699-2 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83662-698-5 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83662-700-5 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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PREFACE

Servant Leadership in Educational Organisations: Leading with Empathy and Purpose is written for educational leaders, including school administrators, faculty members, postgraduate students, and practitioners seeking to enhance their leadership effectiveness through the principles of servant leadership. This book serves both as a practical guide for immediate application and as a resource for deeper understanding of servant leadership principles.

At the heart of the book is our contemporary model of servant leadership, a holistic and integrative framework that connects leadership mindsets, behaviours, and organisational practices within an equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging context. This model illustrates how servant leadership can be enacted at both individual and organisational levels. It positions servant leadership as a timely approach for guiding educational organisations through present-day challenges.

The book offers an in-depth discussion of servant leadership in the context of educational organisations. It begins with a definition and historical overview, providing a solid foundation on the origins and evolution of this leadership approach. It then moves into a wide range of topics essential for understanding and practising servant leadership, including self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and the creation of a supportive work environment.

Key principles such as empathy, humility, ethical decision-making, and moral courage are thoroughly examined, offering readers a framework for integrating these values into their leadership practice. Throughout the book, real-world case studies referred to as ‘Spotlights of Practice’ illustrate how servant leadership is implemented across diverse educational settings. These examples demonstrate how a servant leadership practices can lead to improved employee engagement, trust, and organisational effectiveness.

In a time marked by complexity, uncertainty, and growing accountability pressures, this book highlights how servant leadership principles can be applied to address these challenges. It reframes leadership as a commitment to empowering others, nurturing growth, and serving a shared vision. Grounded

in the belief that uplifting others fosters a more engaged, ethical, and effective organisations, the chapters offer practical strategies, reflective insights, and evidence-informed practices making it an essential read for any current and aspiring educational leaders seeking to make a positive difference in their organisations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the support of Kirsty Woods, Books Commissioning Editor, Education at Emerald Publishing, and William Loh at the Emerald East and Southeast Asia office, who shared our vision for this publication. We are also grateful to Emerald Point for providing a platform that allows us to engage with contemporary issues in a timely and impactful manner. We are enthusiastic about contributing to a body of work that aligns with Emerald Publishing's mission of promoting responsible management and creating a fairer society.

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to the educational leaders and organisations who generously shared their insights and experiences for this book. Your openness and contributions have been invaluable and have greatly enriched the practical depth of our work.

Finally, we acknowledge and honour all servant leaders around the world, those who lead with empathy and purpose. May you continue to model a vision of leadership that uplifts every member of your community.

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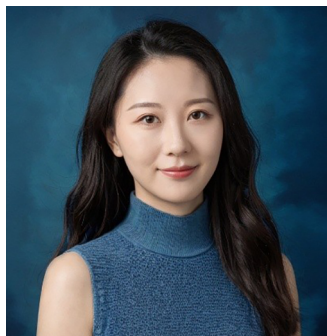


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AN INTRODUCTION TO SERVANT LEADERSHIP

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation, a knowledge-driven economy, post-pandemic recovery, and technological advancements have transformed schools in unprecedented ways ([Adams, 2023](#)). As we venture on the wave of the fourth industrial revolution with increasing digitisation and artificial intelligence use, mental health issues continue to rise, surpassing levels seen during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Kohler & Reece, 2023](#)). Educators are stretched thin, as they are tasked to not only improve student academic outcomes but also meeting societal demands for holistic education. The rapidly evolving world that today's children must prepare for aligns closely with the VUCA acronym (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity).

The role of educational leaders is significantly more demanding over the past decade ([Adams & Muthiah, 2020](#); [Ferrandino, 2001](#); [UNESCO, 2024](#)). Leaders are now held increasingly accountable for school performance and student learning outcomes ([Bush, 2022](#)). Beyond administrative duties, they play a critical role in fostering collaborative working conditions, improving teaching practices, and making teachers better. All of which contribute to improved student learning outcomes ([Adams et al., 2022](#)). Research has shown that leadership ranks second only to teaching in its impact on student achievement ([Leithwood et al., 2020](#)). This makes them key personnel in driving meaningful improvements and enabling change ([Harris et al., 2017](#)).

Studies have shown that leadership can have either a direct ([Chen et al., 2022](#)) or indirect ([Leithwood et al., 2020](#)) effect on student achievement. This occurs through its effects on teacher behaviour, school culture, along with teaching practices ([Özdemir et al., 2024](#)). An exceptional leader who

prioritises instructional leadership over administrative tasks can raise student learning outcomes by as much as 20% (Bush, 2022). Additionally, Hallinger's (2011) 30 years of study on school leadership highlights that leaders who cultivate a positive school climate and build staff leadership capacities will in turn increase student engagement and motivation in learning.

Given these evolving demands, traditional leadership models that emphasise hierarchical control and rigid structures are proving to be outdated. The future of education calls for an approach to leadership that fosters collaboration, equity, and innovation to navigate today's educational organisation's complex challenges. More than ever, prioritising the human element in education is essential. Servant leadership offers a powerful approach in this regard by placing listening, collaboration, and shared decision-making at its core (Liden & van Knippenberg, 2025; Liden et al., 2025; Spears, 2018, 2023). When leaders empower teachers, value their voices, and foster trust, they create a culture that inspire innovation, engagement, and sustained growth.

This chapter explores the definition and origins of servant leadership, followed by an exploration of its key principles and values. We then examine the characteristics and attributes of servant leaders, supported by research. To illustrate these qualities in practice, we introduce a contemporary model of servant leadership, which will be uncovered in the subsequent chapters of this book.

THE EMERGENCE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

The idea that a leader can be a servant to his/her followers is not a new philosophy. Dating back to 600 BC in ancient China, Laozi (also known as Lao-tzu) suggested that the best human qualities reflect the properties of water. As such, it has been suggested that leaders should learn from water, which always remains in the lowest position and never competes with other elements (Northouse, 2021). Moreover, water is selfless and always serves others (Lee, 2003). Thus, the most effective way to comprehend servant leadership is via the metaphor of water (i.e., water-like or 'wateristic' personality features). Examples of the servant leader philosophy also appear in Confucius' teaching propositions (Winston & Ryan, 2008), Bedouin-Arab culture (Jeyaraj & Gandolfi, 2022), and the doctrine of Jesus Christ, who first practised the servant leadership principle (Coetzer et al., 2017). Apart from those in religion and culture, notable servant leaders include Mother Theresa and Gandhi (Bavik, 2020).

Servant leadership is an approach wherein 'leaders want their subordinates to improve for their own good, and view the development of colleagues as

an end, in and of itself, not merely a means to reach the leader's organisation's goals' (Ehrhart, 2004, p. 69). It is a holistic leadership approach that involves leaders and their colleagues in multiple aspects such as relational, ethical, emotional, spiritual, so that they are empowered to grow and fulfil their potential. It seeks to develop staff based on the leaders' altruistic and ethical orientations. In turn, their staffs become more engaged in their work as their well-being and growth are looked after.

Greenleaf (1970) revitalised the practice of servant leadership in business leadership, concluding that servant leaders want to serve and to serve first, and therefore behave according to this serving desire. Greenleaf (1970) further suggested that servant leaders should not utilise care for colleagues as a way to achieve financial benefits; on the contrary, they should think about helping their colleagues achieve betterment as well as the ability to become servants themselves in the future. Servant leaders view themselves as *stewards* of the organisations (Spears, 1998; van Dierendonck, 2011). As other type of leaders, they help to set organisational direction, increase resources and seek financial growth for the organisation. Thus, servant leaders do not ignore direction or performance expectations even though their focus is on the personal growth of their colleagues. It is distinct to other performance-oriented leadership approaches that 'sacrifice people on the altar of profit and growth' (Sendjaya, 2015, p. 4). Servant leaders envision the organisations' sustainable performance over the long run.

Eva et al. (2019) proposed a new definition of servant leadership as

An (1) other-oriented approach to leadership, (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of followers' individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community. (p. 114)

The following text paraphrases the work of Eva et al. (2019, p. 114), who conceptualise servant leadership around three core elements: motive, mode, and mindset. Its *motive*, an 'other-oriented approach to leadership', does not originate from personal ambition of the leader but rather from a deep commitment to serving others. This aligns with Greenleaf's (1977) foundational idea of the 'servant-first' leader. Notably, Greenleaf titled his work 'The Servant as Leader', emphasising that leadership emerges from a service-driven mindset rather than the reverse. What sets servant leadership apart from other leadership perspectives is the intrinsic motivation behind assuming a leadership role. Unlike approaches that prioritise a leader's personal agenda or goals, servant leadership is fundamentally about shifting

focus away from self-interest towards the well-being and development of others (Eva et al., 2019).

This outward focus reflects a leader's deep-seated belief that leadership is a responsibility grounded in service rather than authority. Servant leaders do not lead for personal gain but are driven by a strong sense of altruism, morality, and purpose. This perspective challenges the common misconception that servant leadership is simply about being kind or approachable; rather, it demands inner strength, character, and psychological maturity. A leader who lacks the willingness to genuinely serve others, by this definition, does not characterise the essence of servant leadership.

The *mode* of servant leadership is characterised by a personalised, one-on-one approach, where the leader prioritises the individual needs, aspirations, and development of their colleagues over their own. This approach acknowledges that each colleague is unique, with distinct backgrounds, values, strengths, and limitations (Eva et al., 2019). While organisational policies provide a framework for fairness and consistency, servant leaders recognise that effective leadership requires tailoring support to the specific needs of each individual. They take the time to understand their colleagues' perspectives, motivations, and personal circumstances, often blurring the traditional divide between professional and personal interactions.

Unlike leadership models that are primarily designed to enhance an organisation's financial or operational success, servant leadership is fundamentally about fostering holistic development of their colleagues (Spears, 2018, 2023). It extends beyond performance metrics, emphasising growth in areas such as psychological well-being, emotional resilience, and ethical decision-making. This aligns with the principle of *stewardship*, where the servant leader sees their role as one of nurturing and guiding colleagues towards becoming better themselves (Spears, 1998). Through this commitment, servant leaders earn the trust of their colleagues, who, in turn, view them as trustworthy and reliable mentors.

Finally, the *mindset* of servant leadership is rooted in an outward shift from self-interest to a deep concern for others, both within the organisation and the broader community. Servant leaders see themselves as trustees, responsible not only for the development of their colleagues but also for the well-being of the larger system in which they operate (Eva et al., 2019). This perspective aligns with Block's (1993) concept of *stewardship*, where leaders view their role as one of responsible caretaking, ensuring that both people and organisational resources are developed. Their leadership serves as a catalyst for transformation, inspiring colleagues to adopt a mindset that prioritises service, contribution, and the greater good. In doing so, servant leaders

empower others to become agents of positive change, working to improve lives and challenge systemic barriers that hinder progress.

Eva et al. (2019) argue that three fundamental aspects of servant leadership – motive, mode, and mindset – are essential for a comprehensive and accurate understanding of this leadership approach. These core elements reveal common themes that distinguish servant leadership from other models: a leadership philosophy that places others, rather than the leader, at the centre of its purpose; a strong emphasis on individualised, one-on-one interactions between leaders and colleagues; a broader commitment to the well-being of both organisational stakeholders and the wider community. By articulating these foundational principles, it provides a clearer framework for the understanding of servant leadership theory.

KEY PRINCIPLES AND VALUES OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP VERSUS OTHER LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

There are various leadership theories, including authentic, transformational, and ethical leadership. However, servant leadership is distinct from these approaches (Liden & van Knippenberg, 2025; Liden et al., 2025). Recognising these differences is essential to avoid the mistaken assumption that servant leadership is merely another form of value-based leadership (Eva et al., 2019). Although the concept of servant leadership was introduced earlier, empirical academic research on servant leadership did not commence until the 2000s (Liden & van Knippenberg, 2025). While researchers have tried to conceptually distinguish servant leadership from other types of leadership, such as transformational leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), van Dierendonck's (2011) review was the most promising as it examined the differences between servant leadership and seven other leadership approaches.

Servant leadership and authentic leadership closely resemble each other, as both emphasise the importance of authenticity and sincerity in interactions with others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). However, for servant leaders, the inclination to act with strong self-awareness and self-regulation stems from a spiritual and/or altruistic desire to serve others. These are elements that are missing in the authentic leadership framework. In other words, servant leaders are authentic not merely for the sake of authenticity, but because they are motivated by a higher calling or an inner conviction to serve and create a positive impact on others.

As for transformational leadership, servant leadership focusses on their colleagues' psychological needs as a primary goal, while transformational

leadership considers these needs secondary to achieving organisational goals (van Dierendonck et al., 2014). While there might be apparent overlaps between these two leadership approaches as both are focussed on their colleagues' needs, transformational leaders focus on their colleagues' needs so that they could better achieve organisational goals (i.e., a means to an end), while servant leaders focus on the development of their colleagues (i.e., an end in itself). Servant leaders are more likely than transformational leaders to prioritise their leadership as follows: colleagues first, the organisation second, and themselves last (Sendjaya, 2015).

In comparison with ethical leadership, servant leadership emphasises the element of stewardship as this is viewed as essential for effective leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Spears, 1998). As mentioned earlier in the chapter, this helps servant leaders envision the organisations' sustainable performance over the long run considering the interests of all stakeholders. Leader behaviour in ethical leadership tends to be more prescriptive, guided by established ethical rules that define what is inherently good. In contrast, servant leadership is more flexible and context-dependent, considering both the needs of colleagues and organisational values. While ethical leadership emphasises caring for others, honesty, and trustworthiness (Brown & Treviño, 2006), it places less focus on authenticity and providing clear direction for colleagues.

Taken together, while servant leadership shares similarities with other value-based leadership approaches, it remains distinct in its key principles and values. Unlike authentic, transformational and ethical, and leadership, which often prioritise self-awareness, organisational goals, or ethical norms, servant leadership is fundamentally driven by a deep commitment to serving others first. Its flexibility, colleague-centred focus, and emphasis on holistic growth set it apart as a leadership approach that prioritises the well-being and development of colleagues while balancing organisational needs. Notably, empirical evidence demonstrates its effectiveness: servant leadership, compared with transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership, explained the most incremental variance in key outcomes such as follower organisational commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour (Liden et al., 2025). Subsequent meta-analyses based on more studies have also shown that servant leadership outperforms these other approaches to leadership (Chaudhry et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

CHARACTERISTICS OF SERVANT LEADERS

Greenleaf (1970) claimed that his idea on servant leadership originated from the novel *Journey to the East* written by Hermann Hesse. Greenleaf found that

the presence of ‘the servant’ had a strong influence on the team (Northouse, 2021). Since leadership is related to influence (Adams, 2018), the servant in the novel is not merely a servant but also a leader. Greenleaf (1970) asserted that servant leaders must prioritise service first, driven by their conscience and a sense of stewardship.

Larry Spears is the most renowned scholar of servant leadership after Robert Greenleaf (Parris & Peachey, 2013). In 1992, Spears conducted a study of Greenleaf’s writings. Based on his analysis, he identified and codified 10 key characteristics, which he deemed essential to the development of servant leaders (Spears, 1995, 2010, 2018, 2023). These characteristics have gradually come to be regarded as core elements of servant leadership (van Dierendonck, 2011). Many researchers acknowledge that Spears’ work on servant leadership is the most influential, as he translated Greenleaf’s initial ideas into a servant-leader model (van Dierendonck, 2011). Spears’ 10 characteristics of effective, caring leaders are outlined in Fig. 1.

Spears described the first characteristic, *listening*, as leaders’ need to reinforce their commitment to listening devotedly, because their communication and decision-making skills are naturally valued by their colleagues. The second characteristic, *empathy*, is related to leaders’ ability to understand and empathise with their colleagues. The *healing* characteristic implies leaders’ ability to help their colleagues overcome a broken spirit and emotional hurt to achieve wholeness. *Awareness* indicates leaders’ ability to see through most

Listening	Emphasising the importance of communication and seeking to identify the will of the people
Empathy	Understanding others and accepting how and what they are
Healing	The ability to help make whole
Awareness	Being awake
Persuasion	Seeking to influence others by relying on arguments, not on positional power
Conceptualization	Thinking beyond the present-day need and stretching it into a possible future
Foresight	Foreseeing outcomes of situations and working with intuition
Stewardship	Holding something in trust and serving the needs of others
Commitment to the growth of people	Nurturing the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of others
Building community	Emphasising that local communities are essential in a person's life

Fig. 1. Spears’ 10 Characteristics of Servant Leadership.

circumstances to understand issues related to ethics, power, and values. The fifth characteristic, *persuasion*, shows servant leaders' ability to persuade people by gaining a common consensus from the group instead of leveraging their authoritarian position.

Conceptualisation is about leaders striking a balance between conceptual thinking and their organisation's day-to-day operations. The seventh characteristic is *foresight*, through which servant leaders predict a possible future by absorbing past experiences and the present reality. *Stewardship*, which comes from the Greek word 'aikonomia' (i.e., house of manager), is a characteristic that highlights the servant leader's need to fulfil the needs of others first (Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014). Under *commitment to the growth of people*, leaders consider their colleagues' intrinsic value and commit to the betterment of the colleagues' professional and personal development. Finally, *building community* refers to servant leaders executing their responsibilities to their respective groups.

RESEARCH ON THE ATTRIBUTES OF SERVANT LEADERS

Extensive research has explored the key attributes that define servant leadership, examining its impact across various organisational and cultural contexts. Scholars have sought to identify the essential characteristics that differentiate servant leadership from other leadership styles, leading to the development of multiple frameworks and models. While various studies have conceptualised servant leadership through different lenses, questionnaires have played a significant role in operationalising and assessing its effectiveness.

Eva et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive review of over 200 studies on servant leadership spanning two decades (1998–2018). Their analysis identified 16 distinct questionnaires used to assess servant leadership attributes. However, many of these measures lacked validity, prompting Eva et al. to recommend three key instruments: Liden et al.'s (2015) Global Servant Leadership Scale (SL-7), Sendjaya et al.'s (2019) Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale (SLBS-6), and van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) Servant Leadership Survey (SLS). These scales examine how servant leadership is exhibited in practice, offering insights on its impact on colleagues and organisations.

Liden et al. (2015) identified seven dimensions central to servant leadership: emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowerment, helping subordinates grow and succeed, prioritising subordinates, and ethical behaviour. This questionnaire underscores the community-centred nature of servant leadership, emphasising leaders' responsibility to uplift and