The Value of Servant-leadership in Sodexo

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Roundtable: Servant Leadership

This essay explores the servant-leadership theory and the value it brings to the complex and globally diverse workforce of Sodexo, the global leader in the business services and supplies industry. The discussion includes a servant-leadership literature review, Sodexo's servant-leadership journey, servant-leadership across cultures, leadership dilemmas, and a business case for servant-leadership. Servant-leadership is a globally relevant leadership approach built on dimensions such as love, humility, and service. While cross-cultural differences influence different ways of considering leadership and service or exceptions and rules, servant-leadership connects differences in discovering solutions for organizational dilemmas. The benefits of servant-leadership extend beyond solving problems to include both expected benefits such as improved performance and productivity, and unexpected benefits such as organization citizenship behavior and intrinsic motivation. Sodexo, the global leader in the business services and supplies industry, demonstrates the value of servant-leadership in achieving strategic goals in a complex organization.

Key Words: servant-leadership, dilemmas, Sodexo, culture

The complex and globally diverse modern workplace desperately needs a new leadership approach (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012; Trompenaars & Voerman, 2010). It is no longer acceptable for corporate leadership to be blind to their followers' needs and the communities where they live and work (Greenleaf, & Spears, 1998). According to Parker et al. (2020), modern leaders struggle with leading a complex workforce in today's digital marketplace. People are looking for leaders who understand to help remove barriers that impact meeting their own needs (Trompenaars, & Voerman, 2010). "Probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than any other topic in the behavioral sciences" (Bennis, 1959, pp. 259-260). Servant-leadership, an emerging 20th-century leadership theory, provides solutions to today's dilemmas (Northouse, 2016). According to Greenleaf and Spears (2002), a "servant-leader is servant first" (p. 27). The focus of this article is on the journey of Sodexo, the global leader in the business services and supplies industry. Sodexo began in 1966 in France as

a family run business with a focus on people and service integrated into the company mission statement, values, and ethical principles (see Table 4) that remain today (Sodexo, 2019). As of 2019, the company employed 470,000 people in 67 countries serving 100 million consumers daily. Servant-leadership creates significant organizational value in achieving strategic goals for complex modern for-profit global organizations such as Sodexo.

Discussion

This article includes a foundational literature review of servant-leadership and the journey of Sodexo. Additionally, the cross-cultural relevance of servant-leadership and its role in resolving organizational dilemmas is presented. In conclusion, the article establishes a business case for servant-leadership in the context of Sodexo.

## Servant-Leadership Literature Review

Robert Greenleaf is attributed by most as the founder of servant-leadership, and he described servant-leadership by using a test.

The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002, p.27).

According to Greenleaf and Spears (1998), people are looking for leaders that possess the following ten characteristics: (1) listening to self and others, (2) empathy, (3) healing self and others, (4) awareness, (5) persuasion, (6) conceptual thinking, (7) foresight, (8) stewardship of other's needs, (9) commitment to people development, and (10) building community. These characteristics are foundational to understanding the servant-leadership theory.

In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous marketplace, leadership behaviors alone are insufficient. Behaviors direct what a leader ought to do, and a leader's moral virtues govern what a leader will do (see Figure 1).

Patterson (2003) posited seven moral constructs associated with a leader's focus on serving followers: "love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service" (p. 7). According to Winston (2003), employees thrive in servant-leadership when they share a similar consideration, value, and love for others.

Figure 1

Virtues a Foundation for Behaviors
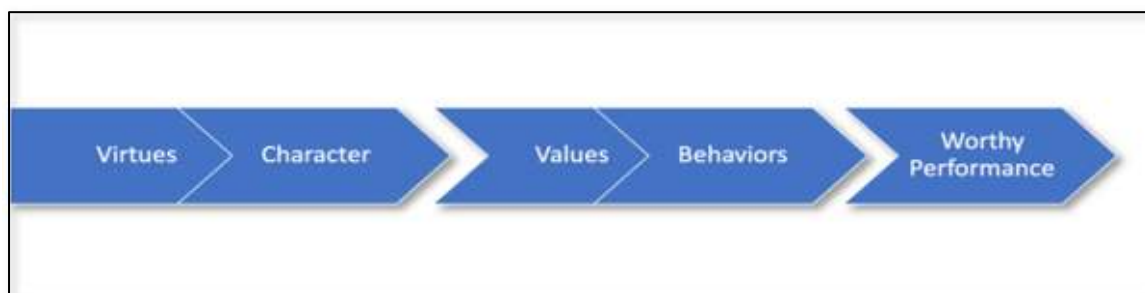
Note. This figure reflects the author's representation of virtues providing a foundation for behaviors that lead to worthy performance.

Contemporary Leadership Theory Comparisons

According to Northouse (2016), servant-leadership, transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and spiritual leadership are emerging contemporary leadership theories.

Comparing the motivations and dimensions of these emerging leadership theories reveals similarities and differences that contribute to a deeper understanding of servant-leadership.

Servant-Leadership and Transformational Leadership

While similar to servant-leadership, the primary focus of transformational leadership is the organizational benefit (Bass, 2000). The focus of servant-leadership is on service to the follower (Patterson, 2003). Table 1 displays the motivations and dimensions of servant-leadership and transformational leadership.

Table 1: *Servant-leadership Theory Compared to Transformational Leadership Theory*

Attribute	Servant-leadership	Transformational Leadership
Motivation	To serve others first and lead second.	To help followers perform beyond expectation for the benefit of the organization.
Dimension	Love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service.	Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Note. This table reflects the attributes of motivation and dimension for both servant-leadership and transformational leadership adapted from Fry (2003), Greenleaf and Spears (2002), and Patterson (2003).

Servant-Leadership and Authentic Leadership.

In contrast to servant-leadership, authentic leadership focuses on the leader being whom they were created to be (George, 2003). Authentic leadership and servant-leadership share an overlap in dimensions of leading with the heart and humility. The critical difference between these two contemporary leadership approaches is the difference in the focus of the leader on themselves for authentic leadership and on others for servant-leadership. Table 2 displays the motivations and dimensions of servant-leadership and authentic leadership.

Table 2: *Servant-leadership Theory Compared to Authentic Leadership Theory*

Attribute	Servant-leadership	Authentic Leadership
Motivation	To serve others first and lead second.	To be the person, the leader was created to be.
Dimension	Love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service.	Purpose, values, leading with heart, relationships, self-discipline, and humility.

Note. This table reflects the attributes of motivation and dimension for both servant-leadership and authentic leadership adapted from Bass (2000), George (2003), Greenleaf and Spears (2002), and Patterson (2003).

Servant-Leadership and Spiritual Leadership.

Spiritual leadership is distinctly different from servant-leadership, although it is the most similar theory of the four contemporary leadership theories discussed. The focus of spiritual leadership is on motivating the leader and others, which contrasts with service to others in servant-leadership. Both spiritual leadership and servant-leadership theories share the dimensions of love, vision, and altruism. Table 3 displays the motivations and dimensions of servant-leadership and spiritual leadership.

Table 3: *Servant-leadership Theory Compared to Spiritual Leadership Theory*

Attribute	Servant-leadership	Spiritual Leadership
Motivation	To serve others first and lead second.	To innately motivate the leader and others through calling and membership.
Dimension	Love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service.	Vision, altruism, love, hope, and faith.

Note. This table reflects the attributes of motivation and dimension for both servant-leadership and spiritual leadership adapted from Fry (2003), Greenleaf and Spears (2002), and Patterson (2003).

Sodexo's Servant-Leadership Journey

Sodexo is the global leader in the business services and supplies industry with its headquarters in France (Sodexo, 2019). Sodexo started as a family run business in Marseilles, France (Sodexo, 2020). Since the beginning of Sodexo in 1966, the company's mission, values, and ethical principals (see Table 4) have guided their people-focused actions around service (Sodexo, 2019).

Table 4: *Sodexo's Mission, Values, and Ethical Principles*

Mission	Values	Ethical Principles
Improve the quality of life of our employees and those we serve, and contribute to the economic, social, and environmental development of the communities, regions, and countries in which we operate.	Service spirit Team spirit Spirit of progress	Loyalty Respect for people and equal opportunity Transparency Business integrity

Note. This table is an adaptation of the Sodexo (2019) company mission, values, and ethical principles.

This global organization of over 470,000 employees is located in 67 countries and served 100 million consumers daily in 2019 (Sodexo, 2019). While Sodexo does not have an explicit statement of servant-leadership, the organization's mission and leaders align with the Greenleaf and Spears (1998) servant-leadership characteristics (See Table 5).

Table 5: *Sodexo Alignment with Servant-leadership Characteristics*

Servant-leadership Characteristic	Sodexo Organizational Example
Listening to Self and Others	On-site teams continually listen to employees, the client, and customers
Awareness	Measurement programs build awareness on the commitment to improving quality of life mission
Persuasion	Purposeful reorganization to increase empowerment versus hierarchy
People Development	Training and development programs to reskill and upskill both technical skills and soft skills, such as empathy

Building Community	Focus on positively impacting employees, customers, communities, and the world

Note. This table reflects examples taken from Sodexo (2019), Sodexo (2020), and Hassell (2017) aligned with the characteristics of servant-leadership identified by Greenleaf and Spears (1998).

According to Sodexo (2019), everyday moments impact the lives of employees, customers, and communities. A central theme of servant-leadership is an other's focus, and according to Sodexo (2019), "employees are the first to benefit from its mission to improve quality of life" (p. 73). Sodexo measures employee quality of life as the employee's physical environment, health and wellbeing, social interaction, recognition, ease and efficiency, and personal growth.

Sodexo considers the lifestyles of their employees globally and encourages work flexibility to promote improved performance for clients and customers (Sodexo, 2019). Sarosh Mistry, Region Chair for North America and Chief Executive Officer, suggested that improved performance starts with ensuring an excellent quality of life for Sodexo employees (Kwittken, 2020). Sylvia Metayer, Chief Growth Officer, humbly stated, "I am learning that to be a CEO is to be a servant" (Hassell, 2017). A servant focus is shared by Sodexo senior leadership. Table 6 provides examples of servant-leadership from both Sarosh Mistry and Sylvia Metayer, who are two members of the Sodexo Executive Committee.

Table 6: *Sodexo Contemporary Servant-leader Examples*

Servant-leadership Dimension	Sodexo Executive	Leadership Example
Love	Sarosh Mistry	Shows compassion for communities impacted by the COVID global pandemic
Humility	Sarosh Mistry	Uses opportunities to highlight other's accomplishments
Altruism	Sarosh Mistry	Shows concern for the welfare of employees creating a $30 million relief fund for COVID impacted employees
Service	Sylvia Metayer	Describes herself as learning to be a servant
Vision	Sylvia Metayer	Future focus on making work easier for others, through development and technology
Empowerment	Sylvia Metayer	Shifts organizational model from top-down to one of empowerment

Note. This table is the author's representation of examples presented by Sarosh Mistry (Kwittken, 2020) and Sylvia Metayer (Hassell, 2017) with Patterson's (2003) servant-leadership dimensions.

Sarosh indicated that Sodexo looks for leaders who motivate employees through service by giving back to the communities they serve (Kwittken, 2020). The servant-leader understands that leadership can use power to serve others' needs through performance (Trompenaars, & Voerman, 2010).

Servant-leadership Across Cultures

The modern workforce is increasingly diverse and complex, and the increase in globalization has amplified the complexity (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012; Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2010). Multiple factors are driving diverse workforce populations. For example, in the United States, the racial majority will become the minority by the mid-2040s (Alba, 2018). Additionally, advances in technology are expanding the ability of employees to work remotely regardless of their physical location. Culture is the one thing that impacts everything (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2010). The need for leaders to possess cultural awareness and thoughtfulness is not an option. Contemporary leadership theories may assist leaders in building connections across various cultures. However, it is the distinct focus of a servant-leader on service that enhances the ability to consider diverse cultural perspectives (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2010).

The Cultural-Endorsed Implicit Leadership Theory infers that followers are more motivated to establish a relationship with a leader if they behave consistently with the follower's expected mental model (Winston & Ryan, 2008). Winston and Ryan (2008) suggested that servant-leadership dimensions represent a global model aligned with many existing cross-cultural concepts. Table 7 displays the alignment of various cross-cultural concepts from different world regions with servant-leadership dimensions.

Table 7: *Global Cultures and Servant-leadership*

Cultural Concept	World Region	Description
Bharavaad-Gita	Indian	This Hindu scripture emphasizes to be caring, believe the best in others, and live in a community that aligns with the servant-leadership moral habit of service.
Christianity	American	The teachings of Jesus closely align with servant-leadership moral habits of love, humility, altruism, and service.
Talmud	Mediterranean	The core text of Judaism is summarized as loving God and people, which closely aligns with servant-leadership moral habits of love, humility, altruism, and is similar to service

| Tao | East Asian | The primary focus of Tao is on love and respect that shares similarities with servant-leadership moral habits of love, humility, and service. |
| Ubuntu | African | A humanness worldview aligned with servant-leadership's moral habits of love and altruism. |

Note. This table represents cross-cultural concepts from different world regions aligned with servant-leadership dimensions adapted from Winston and Ryan (2008).

Mittal and Dorfman (2012) analyzed the degree of importance to effective leadership across world regions using the 2004 GLOBE study research and five dimensions of servant-leadership: "egalitarianism, moral integrity, empowering, empathy and humility" (p. 555). Their examination revealed that each closely analyzed dimension closely connects with effective leadership despite variation across different world areas (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012). Additionally, connections were identified between several societal values and the dimensions of servant-leadership.

Dilemmas of Servant-leadership

Trompenaars and Voerman (2010) presented that connecting cultural differences are vital for organizations to survive. Conflict in the workplace is often the result of value differences (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2010). According to Trompenaars and Voerman, most problems fit within the following seven dilemmas: (1) leading and serving, (2) rules and expectations, (3) parts and the whole, (4) control and passion, (5) specific and diffuse, (6) short term and long term, and (7) push and pull. These dilemmas raise an infinite number of questions about defining good leadership (Trompenaars, & Voerman, 2010). Badaracco (1997) argued that leadership creates moments not defined by policy or procedures when leaders have to choose between right and right decisions resulting in very different outcomes. Competing priorities are common within organizations. Perhaps the conflict is between different departments, or perhaps the conflict is within the same department. The consulting company of Trompenaars Hampden-Turner used its database on individuals' cultural values and identified 8,000 dilemmas from 90,000 people (Trompenaars, & Voerman, 2010).

While some may perceive dilemmas as opposite concepts on different ends of a continuum, one-dimensional thinking influenced by cultural and worldview differences (Trompenaars, & Voerman, 2010; Wallace, 2007). Servant-leadership is an approach that enables a multitude of options when approaching workplace dilemmas (Trompenaars, & Voerman, 2010). The starting point is a "natural feeling that one wants to serve first" (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002, p. 27). According to Trompenaars and Voerman (2010), servant-leadership requires a fundamental shift in leadership thinking, and it is this shift that creates solutions for dilemmas (see Table 8).

Table 8: Foundational Thinking of Servant-leadership

From	To
Linear thinking	Cyclical thinking
One-way First to last thinking	Two-way direction thinking
Opposite values thinking	Combined values thinking
One-dimensional thinking	Holistic thinking
Top-down thinking	Bottom-up thinking
Analysis thinking	Synthesis thinking

Note. This table, adapted from Tompenaars and Voerman (2010), reflects the foundational thinking differences of servant-leaders.

Servant-leaders do not ignore cultural influences on views of leadership and service or rules versus exceptions. Instead, guided by a service focus, they understand and choose appropriate starting points for leading and serving others (Trompenaars, & Voerman, 2010). Servant-leaders leverage cultural diversity as strengths by appreciating cultural differences (Trompenaars, & Voerman, 2010).

Being a global servant-leadership organization Sodexo faces many dilemmas. Trompenaars and Voerman (2010) stated, "differences in viewpoints in an international environment ensure various dilemmas arise" (p. 49). Research has shown that there is no standard approach to solving these problems. For example, when considering the dilemma of leading versus serving, different cultures have different perspectives on whether leaders earn a leader's status by performance or if leader status is assigned based on age, gender, or family (Trompenaars, & Voerman, 2010). Cultures with a higher performance orientation prefer leadership assignments based on performance and structures. The structures are perceived to help clarify task coordination rather than identify who holds executive power (Trompenaars, & Voerman, 2010). Table 9 displays the performance orientation practice rating from the GLOBE Project (2020) across a sample of the 67 countries where Sodexo operates, highlighting the leadership challenge.

Table 9: Performance Orientation Practice Ratings by Sodexo Locations

Sodexo Location	Performance Orientation Practice Rating
United States	4.49
China	4.45
India	4.25
France	4.11
Morocco	3.99

| Sodexo Location	Performance Orientation Practice Rating
Colombia	3.94
Poland	3.89
Sweden	3.72

Note. This table reflects the GLOBE Project (2020) performance orientation practice scores for world areas where Sodexo operates. The seven-point scale rating labels used were: one is very low, two is low, three is relatively low, four is medium, five is relatively high, six is high, and seven is very high.

The recent COVID-19 crisis brought the dilemma of leading versus serving to the forefront for Sodexo. The crisis served as a servant-leadership validation test for how Sodexo acts when times get tough. In response to the impacts of COVID-19 and the loss of hourly worker jobs associated with venues, Sodexo used its global leadership to serve. Sodexo established a $30 million global relief fund for impacted hourly workers, and in communities donated and prepared food for school lunches, families, and nonprofits (Kwittken, 2020). Sarosh Mistry, Region Chair for North America and Chief Executive Officer, suggested Sodexo's response start with ensuring an excellent quality of life for employees (Kwittken, 2020). Reflecting on the crisis, Sarosh responded that every crisis creates a learning opportunity, and wished Sodexo would have done even more for employees (Kwittken, 2020). Also, highlighting the challenge between rules versus expectations, Sarosh indicated that Sodexo learned where too much bureaucracy existed and vowed to make Sodexo better (Kwittken, 2020).

The Business Case for Servant-Leadership

There are many individual and organizational benefits associated with servant-leadership, such as performance, productivity, intrinsic motivation, organizational citizenship behavior, organizational alignment, improved workplace climate, enhanced employee capacity, and increased creativity. Figure 2 represents that some servant-leadership benefits are expected, and others are unexpected.

There are many benefits of workforce alignment, including taking a strategy from created to realized. According to Patterson (2003), servant-leadership creates an increase in the leader, and follower commitment, yielding increased intrinsic motivation that amplifies the benefits of workforce alignment. Patterson suggested that higher levels of "intrinsic motivation causes people to do more and results in higher performance" (p.6). Becchetti et al. (2013) found evidence supporting a positive link between higher levels of employee intrinsic motivation and work productivity. Shu (2015) discovered evidence that intrinsic motivation is a moderating factor in employee engagement, independent of a leader's style, and concluded that organizations should emphasize increased intrinsic motivation.

Figure 2: *Expected and Unexpected Benefits of Servant-leadership*
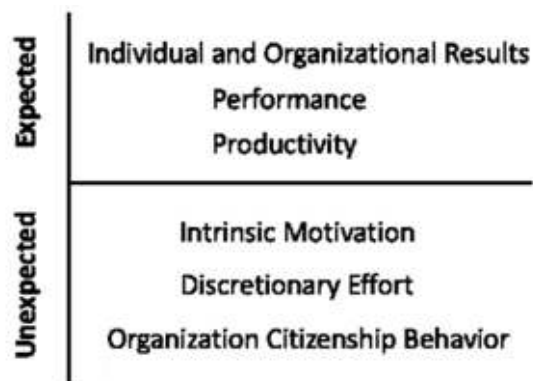
Note. This figure reflects the grouping of expected and unexpected benefits of servant-leadership based on Becchetti et al. (2013), Patterson (2003), Shu (2015), and Walumbwa et al. (2010).

In addition to expected behavior, servant-leadership impacts an employee's discretionary effort, also known as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Walumbwa et al. (2010) described OCB as contributing to an organization beyond formal job requirements. For example, consider two employees are walking down a hall. Both employees see a piece of paper on the floor. Only one employee stops to pick it up even though it is neither employees' job responsibility. Walumbwa et al. found that servant-leadership improves the workplace climate and increases OCB that benefit the organization.

A servant-leaders love for others multiplies the benefits associated with servant-leadership. Love makes a better workplace and improves outcomes (Ferris, 1988). Sodexo, like every other organization, is not looking to stay the same year after year. Innovation is required to stay relevant and succeed in today's business. Love practiced by leadership can increase follower's productivity and creativity (Ferris, 1988).

Sodexo has many accolades and a strong business case representing excellent financial performance and leadership: number one France-based private employer worldwide, number one industry sector organization in both the Dow Jones Sustainability Index and the 2019 Sustainability Yearbook, number two organization among the Fortune Magazine 2019 most admired companies in its sector, and the number one organization in the categories of innovation and social responsibility (Sodexo, 2019). Sodexo significantly outperformed the 40 largest French stocks based on market capitalization, and its stock has multiplied 67 times (Sodexo, 2019). Since Sodexo's initial listing, the stock has "appreciated by an average of 12.5% per annum, excluding dividends" (Sodexo, 2019, p. 261).

Conclusion

The complex and globally diverse modern workplace desperately needs a new leadership approach (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012; Trompenaars & Voerman, 2010). An examination of the servant-leadership literature reveals a globally relevant leadership approach built on dimensions such as love, humility, and service. Although cross-cultural differences influence the opposite thinking about topics such as leadership and service or exceptions and rules, servant-leadership connects the differences in thinking and provides solutions for organizational dilemmas. The benefits of servant-leadership extend beyond solving problems. They include expected benefits such as improved performance and productivity and unexpected benefits such as organizational citizenship behavior and intrinsic motivation. Sodexo provides an example of the value of servant-leadership in achieving strategic goals in a modern for-profit globally diverse organization. Additional research could investigate how Sodexo attracts, develops, and promotes servant-leaders.

About the

Dr. Jeff Doolittle received his Doctorate in Strategic Leadership from Regent University. He has helped business owners and executives of small businesses to global Fortune 50 companies, and his work is taught in university classrooms. Dr. Doolittle is the founder of Organizational Talent Consulting, a premier executive coaching and business consulting firm for leaders and organizations interested in achieving success and significance.

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