

“Leading through service”: Employees’ job experiences in a servant leadership organization

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Abstract

While numerous organizations have successfully adopted servant leadership, only a few studies have focused on understanding of what it is like for employees to work in an organization that is devoted to servant leadership with regards to the practice of servant leadership. This qualitative study was conducted in an architecture and engineering services organization in the United States of America that operates in a business-to-business market and is dedicated to servant leadership. To obtain a rich description of the employees’ experiences of the practice of servant leadership and thus an understanding of the phenomenon, both in-depth semi-structured interviews with employees and observations were analyzed and interpreted according to phenomenological methodology. The following three themes emerged: selecting customers in line with the practice of servant leadership, fulfilling the needs of customers and employees, and contributing to society. The study findings provide important theoretical and practical contributions to the practice of servant leadership as it sheds new light on the relationship with customers concerning the practice of the concept. First, the findings demonstrate how employees carefully select their customers in line with the practice of servant leadership, and how the employees are equally devoted to fulfilling both the needs of employees and customers. This enables the employees to fruitfully practice servant leadership together with their customers, led by the desire to have a positive impact on society.

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Keywords: Servant leadership; employees; customers; partnership; community service.

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1 Introduction

In the context of the practice of servant leadership in organizations the focus is on the welfare and growth of people (Flynn et al., 2016; Kalttinen and Hakanen, 2022). The philosophy of servant leadership, introduced by Robert Greenleaf, emphasizes providing leadership through serving others (Greenleaf, 1970). At its core, servant leadership focuses on serving others (Kool and van Dierendonck, 2012; Liu, 2019; Xiu et al., 2024) with the aim to build and foster a fair and fruitful workplace (Giolito et al., 2020; Ragnarsson et al., 2018). Servant leaders value and develop people, display authenticity, and build communities while providing and sharing leadership (Laub, 2018). Servant leaders emphasize accountability by holding people responsible for their jobs as well as building on stewardship with attention to long-term vision, the good of the whole and societal responsibility (van Dierendonck, 2011), as they aim to have a positive effect on society (Crippen and Willows, 2019; Eva et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2021). The key elements of servant leadership are embedded in daily practices, reflecting both its servant and leadership dimensions (van Dierendonck, 2011). Operational responsibilities align with the servant aspect, emphasizing care and support, while strategic and directional roles embody the leadership dimension (Blanchard, 2018).

Servant leadership has not been without criticism, which may not be surprising as Robert Greenleaf did not provide precise instructions about how to practice servant leadership (1970). According to him there is no single guideline available that points out what it is that makes one a servant leader (1970, 1977, 2002). For this reason, it may be challenging to comprehend the idea of servant leadership and deliver it to the workplace. This is evident in the paradoxical nature of servant leadership as the two extremes of serving and leading are linked together which many find hard to understand, as serving implies being a follower while leadership is about being a leader and influencing others (Pircher Verdorfer, 2019). This may be the reason that, despite numerous studies, researchers have not come to an agreement about the definition of servant leadership (e.g., Parris and Peachey, 2013; Liu, 2019). This may be problematic as “this lack of consensus on how to define servant leadership has contributed to a fractured field of scholars who largely appear to test and refine their own models in isolation from other theoretical developments of servant leadership” (Liu, 2019, p. 1100). Eva et al. (2019) conducted a systematic literature review presenting one of the latest definitions of servant leadership which includes three features: motive, mode and mindset. In relation to these features, servant leadership is about and manifested in “(1) someone or something other than the leader, (2) one-on-one interactions between leaders and followers, and (3) an overarching concern towards the wellbeing of the wider organizational stakeholders and the larger community” (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114).

This study examines the lived experiences of both managers and non-managers within a servant leadership organization. Since the practice of servant leadership is expected to be embraced by all employees, including both managers and non-managers (Ragnarsson et al., 2018), it is essential to include both groups. References to ‘employees’ in this study encompass individuals in both managerial and non-managerial roles.

Numerous organizations attribute their success, including employee well-being and a positive effect on performance, to practicing servant leadership. Therefore, researchers and practitioners have shown an increased interest in better understanding the experience of practicing servant leadership (Carter and Baghurst, 2014; Ragnarsson et al., 2018). Despite increased research on the topic, there is limited knowledge about how employees in servant leadership organizations experience the *practice of servant leadership* (Liao et al., 2021). The need for more studies about the *practice* of servant leadership has been widely underlined (Eva et al., 2019; Pircher Verdorfer, 2019; Ragnarsson et al., 2023), but very few studies have explored employees’ experience of the practice of servant leadership within the business sector. Moreover, most studies focusing on the application of servant leadership have been conducted in organizations where employees are not committed to the practice of servant leadership. Correspond-

ingly there is a need to further the knowledge about what it is like to work within a servant leadership organization.

To achieve a better understanding of the employees' experience of the practice of servant leadership in an organization that is devoted to servant leadership, this study endeavors to answer the following research question:

How do employees in an organization that publicly claims to be devoted to servant leadership experience the practice of servant leadership?

The next section presents a literature review on servant leadership, including servant leadership and contributing to society, servant leadership and customers, and the practice of servant leadership. Furthermore, we explain the phenomenological methodology of this study, present the findings, and discuss the three themes revealed by the interviews and observations considering relevant theory and research. The conclusion follows.

2 Servant leadership

Servant leadership encompasses a focus on employees and their well-being as core to servant leadership as well as building on well-defined vision and long-term goals (van Dierendonck, 2011; Wu et al., 2021). Serving and leading are intertwined in servant leadership, where to "serve" comes first and to "lead" follows, meaning the two may not be separated and a servant leader provides service to others before providing leadership (Greenleaf, 1970). In servant leadership, practicing good work ethics is related to the concept of foresight, as it is considered an ethical failure not to aim to foresee the consequences of one's actions and decisions and to take appropriate actions if necessary (Ragnarsson et al., 2018). This practice also involves demonstrating integrity, including being honest and trustworthy (Liden et al., 2015). These aims entail stewardship, which involves, for example, having long-term goals and showing responsibility while building and establishing a community (van Dierendonck, 2011). In accordance with this view, van Dierendonck (2011) underlined in his conceptual model of servant leadership that servant leaders are motivated to both serve and lead. This means all stakeholders are taken into consideration as businesses exist to provide meaningful work for employees as well as to provide the customer with a service or product (Liden et al., 2014). To evaluate whether servant leadership is achieved, Greenleaf (2002) asked the following questions in his so-called best test:

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 not be further deprived? (p. 27).

The best test is related to the commitment of promoting well-being and the development of others through the activity of empowerment (Mittal and Dorfman, 2012; Schermuly et al., 2022) and to contributing to society in various ways and demonstrating social responsibility, such as by volunteering for good causes and providing service in the community (Eva et al., 2019). This is related to stewardship, which means being responsible for the common interest, acting as both a caretaker and a role model, having a positive impact by contributing to the greater good of society (Crippen and Willows, 2019; Wu et al., 2021). It also involves focusing on giving back, leaving a positive legacy (Beck, 2014), and establishing "a comprehensive framework for providing meaning to work" (Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017, p. 15). In this way, servant leadership enables employees to feel that their work is meaningful and underpins that servant leaders serve a higher purpose (Greenleaf, 2003; Sendjaya, 2010). In essence, servant leadership is about putting others first, fostering a supportive and empowering environment,

and leading with humility and care (Greenleaf, 1970). In this regard, authenticity stands for integrity, honestly revealing oneself, and being true to one's words (van Dierendonck, 2011), and being empathetic relates to the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes (Blanchard, 2015). Servant leaders seek to understand and meet the important needs of employees (Laub, 1999; van Dierendonck, 2011). These needs are important and relevant from the point of view of organizational goals and visions (Eva et al., 2019). In the context of business organizations, servant leadership involves effective collaboration (Irving and Longbotham, 2007) and a focus on growing employees in their workplace and serving their needs while providing direction, purpose, and accountability (Gunnarsdóttir, 2014; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017).

As stated above, serving precedes leading (Greenleaf, 2002), as the main purpose of a devoted servant leadership organization is to enable employees to grow (McCallaghan et al., 2020; Zarei et al., 2022) while having a positive impact on the community (Eva et al., 2019; Spears, 2004; Wu et al., 2021). However, this is done without neglecting other stakeholders, as the practice of servant leadership is supposed to lead to win-win relationships with business partners while providing goods and services that fulfill customers' needs, with the aim to achieve organizational goals (Glashagel, 2009; Ragnarsson et al., 2023).

Several models of servant leadership have been introduced in scholarly literature. A notable example, which will be used as a theoretical lens in this study, is the OLA model developed by Laub (1999) including the Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA), which quantitatively measures the perceived practice of servant leadership in organizations. The OLA consists of six clusters of servant leadership characteristics intended to guide the understanding and practice of servant leadership (Laub, 2018). These six characteristics or foundational disciplines are value people, develop people, build community, display authenticity, provide leadership, and share leadership (Laub, 2018). To *value people* refers to showing care and compassion toward others, trusting and believing in them, being willing to serve others' needs first, and practicing receptive and nonjudgmental listening. To *develop people* means serving the community, providing opportunities to learn and grow, demonstrating appropriate behavior, and building people through encouragement and affirmation. To *build community* means building strong personal relationships, collaborating with people, and valuing individual differences. To *display authenticity* means being open and accountable to others, being willing to learn from other people, and being able to maintain integrity and trust. To *provide leadership* means envisioning the future, striving to take the initiative, clarifying goals, and exhibiting courage. Finally, to *share leadership* means facilitating a shared vision, demonstrating humility, accepting that one does not know everything, and being willing to depend on others (Laub, 2018).

2.1 Servant leadership and customer relations

The focus in servant leadership is primarily on the employees (e.g., Hale and Fields, 2007; Liden, Panaccio et al., 2014). However, this does not mean that other shareholders such as customers do not matter as the emphasis on first taking care of employees is supposed to lead to better customer care (e.g., Laub, 2018; Liden et al., 2014). Coetzer (2018) presented a conceptual model about the functions of a servant leader where focus on service to customers is emphasized and linked to positive influence for both customers and society as these are "the reason[s] why the organization exists" (p. 147) and thus are among the main tasks of servant leaders. Servant leadership entails a concern for the welfare of customers (Aryee et al., 2023) and has been shown to strengthen customer relations (Shafiq and Khan, 2024). Several studies have described a positive link between servant leadership and employees' responsibility to serve customers, the quality of service, and customer satisfaction (e.g., Carter and Baghurst, 2014; Wu et al., 2013). Servant leadership has been found to improve service quality, customer-focused actions, and supportive behaviors among employees interacting with customers (Aribi et al., 2024) as they seek to be customer oriented and deliver excellent customer service (Heine et al., 2023). This aligns with the emphasis on customer service as an integral part of servant leadership, as reflected in Liden et al.'s (2014) model of serving culture. In this model,

customers are treated as part of an in-group along with employees, and servant leadership behaviors influence both individual outcomes and organizational performance. Additionally, Liden et al. (2014) found that the serving model was positively associated with customer service behaviors, organizational performance, and employee job performance.

2.2 The practice of servant leadership

The practice of servant leadership relates to both parts of the idea where the servant part is linked to daily activities and implementation, and the leadership part is linked to providing directions, purpose, and vision of the organization (Blanchard, 2018). To realize this principle and implementation of servant leadership, Blanchard (2018) proposes that the typical top-down organizational hierarchy must be inverted; managers at the top of the pyramid should be able to serve other employees, and employees should be able to focus on their efforts to serve the customers.

Carter and Baghurst (2014) conducted a qualitative study focusing on the practice of servant leadership in an organization committed to the concept. They found that servant leadership helped people to work together in peer-to-peer relationships. Furthermore, it helped employees feel that their opinions were valued and that they were responsible for serving the customers while contributing to organizational success. Similar findings were revealed in a phenomenological study by Ragnarsson et al. (2018), which explored the lived experience of employees in an organization practicing servant leadership. The study found that employees were open with each other and supported one another's learning and development at work, while also being held accountable for achieving business results. In relation to this, the dimension of leading was practiced even more than the dimension of serving (Ragnarsson et al., 2018). In their case study, which also included an online survey, McNeff and Irving (2017) found that the servant leadership practices of the owners of a network of family-owned companies and their emphasis on valuing people were foundational to servant leadership practices and had a strong and positive impact on the organizational culture and job satisfaction of the employees. Finally, Ragnarsson et al. (2023), in their qualitative study, demonstrated that the practice of servant leadership involves a commitment to fostering a continuous and balanced growth of both the organization and its employees. Due to the limited number of studies, there is still a need to investigate how servant leadership is practiced within servant leadership organizations. Therefore, the objective of this study is to obtain insight into employees' experiences of the practice of servant leadership in an organization that is publicly committed to servant leadership.

3 Research methodology

The following organization was chosen because it has publicly communicated having practiced servant leadership for decades. The organization has also been verified as a reliable example by the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. This organization operates in the business-to-business market in the United States of America and is listed by "Modern Servant Leader" as a servant leadership organization. For an organization to be on the list, "There must be at least one publicly documented reference to the organization and its view of, support for, or belief in servant leadership principles. This may be in job descriptions, news articles, employee posts or other publicly available sources" (Lichtenwalner, 2024). We provided criteria to our contact person within the organization, who then suggested a list of potential participants. The criteria focused on selecting a diverse group of employees based on gender, age, tenure within the organization, and role. The aim was to achieve a balance between female and male participants, as well as between managers and non-managers. To ensure confidentiality the participants and the organization were assigned pseudonyms.

Temp [pseudo name of organization] is an architecture and engineering services organization committed to, and has formally practiced, servant leadership for over 40 years or ever since it was established by its founder, who is still working with the organization and currently serves as the chairman of the board. This company has about 85 employees, is privately owned by 10 partners, and is based in a single location but has plans for expansion. Through the years, most of its customers have been non-profit organizations, such as schools and charity institutions, and the company has participated in various preservation projects. It is highlighted on the company's web page that the aim is to take care of all stakeholders' needs, including those of their customers who they claim to aspire to service well. The organization offers training programs for employees in "The Temp Academy." Classes include topics such as customer service, communication skills, miscellaneous technical skills and servant leadership. Sometimes customers participate in lecturing and discussion in various programs in the "The Temp Academy."

The purpose of phenomenology is to explore the lived experiences of people in particular situations in a systematic way and to reveal the meaning of those situations (van Manen, 2016). Phenomenological examples are usually in the form of descriptions of lived experiences such as anecdotes, narratives, or concrete accounts (van Manen, 2017). In this study, interviews and observations of work meetings were conducted. Phenomenology is an appropriate methodology because this study focuses on the actual lived experiences of employees and examines what it is like for people to work in a servant leadership organization. For this reason, the methodology of phenomenology fits the objectives of this study and the research question as phenomenology allows one to study phenomena in depth and focuses on what is really taking place and going on in a specific situation. Servant leadership is a phenomenon implemented by people in the real world and this study is about understanding the lived experience of human beings who practice servant leadership, and phenomenology allows for a deeper exploration of human experiences than other research approaches.

Interviews and observations of work meetings were recorded on a digital recorder, transcribed verbatim, analyzed, and interpreted. Fourteen in-depth semi-structured, open-ended interviews lasting 45–70 minutes each, including follow-up interviews, were conducted with seven female and five male employees ranging from 30 to 75 years and with work experience from two to 40 years (see Table 1). All participants had a university degree or specialized license. Half of the participants held a management position. Due to confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. We chose not to include job titles, as doing so could allow employees of the participating organization to identify specific individuals based on titles such as chief executive officer, marketing manager, marketing representative, or human resource representative. Interviews were conducted in the same meeting room at the organization. Among other things, the interviewees were asked questions about their personal development, how they experienced interactions and work challenges, how important decisions are made, and how goals are set in their workplace. All participants were asked about what servant leadership meant to them and about their experience of how it is practiced at their workplace. The participants seemed comfortable and expressed themselves freely.

The study employed follow-up interviews to gain a deeper understanding of employees' experiences with servant leadership practices. This allowed researchers to gather information and explore the participants' descriptions of their experiences, ultimately leading to a more comprehensive understanding (Bamberger, 2018; Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Additionally, the study utilized *critical incident technique* by observing two work meetings involving five participants. To minimize interference during observation (Ray, 2006), the focus was on specific issues and situations (Chell and Pittaway, 1998). This approach allowed for the collection of valuable facts (Flanagan, 1954). The first meeting included three participants, one manager and two non-managers, and lasted for 35 minutes. The second meeting, which lasted 40 min-

utes, involved a manager and a non-manager. The participants arrived prepared, expressed themselves openly, and contributed to the discussion as needed. All interactions were friendly, and participants appeared focused on the agenda while demonstrating a willingness to listen. These observations were primarily confirmatory and intended to complement the interviews, which served as the main method of data collection. The aim was to determine whether the experience of servant leadership, including behaviors and dynamics, observed in the meetings aligned with or differed from those reported during the interviews. Notably, the participants in these meetings were also drawn from the pool of interviewees, ensuring consistency and representativeness.

Table 1
Overview of the Interviewees

Name	Gender	Role	Details
Gerrard	Male	Manager	59 years old, 35 years work experience
Rachel	Female	Non-Manager	48 years old, 7 years work experience
Kate	Female	Manager	35 years old, 4 years work experience
Kenny	Male	Manager	75 years old, 40 years work experience
Alan	Male	Non-Manager	33 years old, 5 years work experience
Laura	Female	Non-Manager	40 years old, 17 years work experience
Jordan	Male	Non-Manager	35 years old, 2 years work experience
Heather	Female	Non-Manager	35 years old, 14 years work experience
Phil	Male	Manager	62 years old, 39 years work experience
Norma	Female	Manager	45 years old, 20 years work experience
Rudy	Female	Manager	38 years old, 15 years work experience
Belinda	Female	Non-Manager	30 years old, 3 years work experience
Kate	Female	Manager	Follow-up Interview
Rachel	Female	Non-Manager	Follow-up Interview

Interviews and observations were interpreted according to the phenomenological methodology of description, reduction, and interpretation (Lanigan, 1988; Orbe, 1998; van Manen, 2016). In the *description* phase, the transcripts and notes from the interviews and observations about the participants' experience of the practice of servant leadership were synthesized into a cohesive narrative. During this stage, it was essential to suspend all presuppositions based on prior knowledge and experiences and to be aware of personal biases and subjectivity about the phenomena being studied (Kristjánssdóttir and DeTurk, 2013; van Manen, 2017). In relation to description, it is important that lived experience equates with living through pre-reflective experience which means we cannot access the meaning of our experience through introspective reflection because if we reflect on an experience we are having at that exact moment, the moment is already gone (van Manen, 2017). In the second phase, phenomenological *reduction*, it was decided which part of the description from the interviews and observations was most important, which included examining all narratives to determine essential themes (Lanigan, 1988; van Manen, 2017). The researcher needs to involve himself/herself in the lived experience (being part of the world being studied) of the participants to pull out the essence of the phenomenon or experiences being described. The researcher needs to step out of that experience and by re-reading, re-writing, and re-collecting the interview and the observation data the researcher can start to discover something unexpected about the studied lived experience.

rience (Lanigan, 1988). The final phase, *interpretation*, involved thematizing the meanings of the participants' experiences of the practice of servant leadership that was ambiguous or had not been revealed in previous phases and connecting these themes both to one another and to the research question (Lanigan, 1988; van Manen, 2016) to obtain the essence of their lived experiences. This is how phenomenology is conducted: it aims at "*retrospectively* bringing to our awareness some experience we lived through to be able to reflect phenomenologically on the living meaning of this lived experience" (van Manen, 2017, p. 813). This means that the researcher has to go beyond what is directly given in order to interpret concealed meanings of the phenomenon. This is important because, as stated before, lived experience cannot be grasped in its immediate manifestation, but only reflectively and reflexively as past experience. This stage includes sharpening the primary themes in order to recognize what is most important of the studied phenomenon and relate the themes to one another, and also to the research question (Lanigan, 1988; van Manen, 2016). Table 2 shows an overview of the analysis.

Table 2
Themes – overview of the analysis

Themes	Quote	Interpretation
Fulfilling the needs of customers and employees	"You first have to solve the basic problem [for the client] ... raising their spirit ... is to give them something that they didn't expect ..."	Willingness to go the extra mile for customers when servicing them
	"Can someone please come help? ... and [immediately] they helped me put everything together"	Employees stick together and seek to help each other at work
Selecting customers in line with the practice of servant leadership	"We work really well with people who are building because they have a compelling mission-based need"	Customers are expected to be willing to practice servant leadership with the main criteria to have a positive influence in the community
Contributing to society	"We think that community service is important for us and we really want to do it"	Employees are encouraged to attend to societal needs

4 Findings

The employees work closely with their customers. They revealed that they select customers in accordance with their practice of servant leadership to achieve their vision and goals. They disclosed that their experience involved having an important role in their collaborations with customers and fellow employees, and they emphasized accepting a balanced effort in attending to employees' and customers' interests and needs, while contributing to society at large. Three themes emerged from the employees' experience of the company's current practice of servant leadership: (1) selecting customers in line with the practice of servant leadership, (2) fulfilling the needs of customers and employees, and (3) contributing to society.

4.1 Selecting customers in line with the practice of servant leadership

The employees emphasized the importance of selecting their customers in accordance with their practice of servant leadership. In their experience, this process is one of the *main* factors that enables them to practice servant leadership. Norma described their preferred customers as follows:

We work really well with people who are building because they have a compelling mission-based need. People who are very clear about their mission ... very clear about their goals ... We work well with people who are building for the long term ... so that's why we do so many preservation projects: because ... we believe in that ... Many of our really good clients ... tend to be not-for-profit [institutions].

Norma's words show that part of the company's practice is to seek certain types of customers, preferably non-profit organizations that aim to have a positive influence in the community. Employees revealed feeling good about working with these types of customers because it allows them to support good causes through collaboration with clients and contribute to society. Several employees expressed that both parties learn to trust each other, resulting in the mutual goal of continuing to develop a working relationship. As noted by Alan:

That's how we get repeating customers ... You gotta build that trust in that relationship with them first and say, "Hey, what are the goals that you have, how can I help you achieve it?" ... And that's our part of servant leadership ... you're helping them achieve what they want.

Alan's statement reveals an ambition to succeed and that employees are driven by a focus on goals and achievement, hence providing direction and leadership for their customers.

The employees agreed that their practice of being selective regarding their customers enables them to put their hearts and minds into their projects, which in turn delivers better business results for both parties. They also indicated that they expect to practice the *serve* aspect of servant leadership with customers. For example, Kate explained that they seek "to understand their customers' goals but at the same time they expect their customers to acknowledge and respect their suggestions."

The employees experienced customer selection as beneficial for themselves and their customers, and they confirmed Temp's readiness to *cut ties with customers* or *not take them aboard* if the partnership does not seem to enable such mutually beneficial collaboration. Norma underlined this approach: "We get calls all the time from clients who would not be a good fit and so we direct them to ... other architects ... it is not at all uncommon for us to send work to somebody else."

4.2 Fulfilling the needs of customers and employees

The employees reported that attending to the needs of both co-workers and customers is part of what motivates them, and the employees aim to establish close collaboration with their customers to fulfill their most important needs. For example, Phil stated that to solve problems for their customers, Temp's employees' priority was to carefully listen to them. The employees are always willing to go the extra mile for their customers because they believe that this approach strengthens business relationships and helps the employees to fulfill their customers' needs and exceed their expectations:

A lot of it is about listening to what the client is looking for. You first have to solve the basic problem [for the client] ... raising their spirit ... is to give them something that they didn't expect ... It makes it easier and more functionally possible to collaborate with [the client].

The employees expressed their shared belief in how important it is to meet the needs of the customers and to provide good service corresponding to these needs. Jordan further explained that listening carefully to understand what the customer needs is fundamental to the employees' ability to provide good services to support their customers' success:

I think hearing what the client actually wants or needs ... is a valuable thing that the firm does, perhaps better than other firms. I think that is built on this idea of servant leadership and helping them, the client, get to where they want to go ... That trickles down all the way ... through every employee, and it is just in the culture [of the organization].

Jordan expressed that employees have confidence in this approach and believe that it helps them to satisfy their customers. By communicating regularly with clients, employees are able to understand and fulfill the clients' needs.

Rudy, the principal of the Temp Academy, discussed the emphasis the employees put on attending to their customers' needs and that it is important to help employees collaborate with customers and properly understand their needs and preferences: "Everyone goes through training on managing customer expectations and in soft skills to communicate more effectively and work better with customers on solving their problems." Rudy's statement shows that employees are expected to have the skills to communicate and interact with their customers, for example, by providing valuable feedback or presenting and discussing various ideas.

Fulfilling the needs of co-workers is also emphasized, as Heather described when discussing servant leadership and how it relates to employees and the importance of serving them: "I think it is so very important that we remember that here we also have to serve our employees ... and we do that by making sure that we are helping them meet their individual goals and needs." Heather indicated that the employees care for and respect each other as they aim to assist one another when necessary. In this regard, Norma emphasized that servant leadership is not only about meeting each other's needs by serving but also about by leading: "I mean, you're leading through service."

This outlook was also expressed by Phil when describing the role of servant leadership in their workplace: "I guess that's so fundamental ... of what we do ... That's where servant leadership really guides the firm, in that we seek first to serve ... then to lead." This approach relates to the atmosphere at work, which consists of helpfulness and employees who see each other as part of a big family, as revealed by Kenny when he referred to a co-worker as being like the "mom" in the office. This feeling expressed by Kenny indicates a sense of family spirit in the workplace, also revealed by other employees. This shared feeling shows how the employees stick together as a family and are willing to assist each other. Kate told a story about a problem that co-workers helped solve, highlighting this caring attitude and willingness to help and respond quickly when needed:

I [said to my co-workers], "I know it's 6:30, which I know means that you are all working late because you are busy, [but] if I don't get this out the door in the next 20 minutes, we are missing a major deadline. Can someone please come help?" ... and [immediately] they helped me put everything together.

Overall, these stories exemplify a culture of caring and responsiveness towards both customers and fellow workers and suggest that humility is heralded in the workplace. The employees indicated that they are not afraid to accept that they depend on each other, and they ask for help when they feel it is needed to service their customers. As Kate explained, when employees feel it is necessary, they will go to great lengths to do a better job and satisfy their customers at the same time: "I stayed on the phone to 3 a.m. to help an employee on a project as it had to be finished [for the customer]."

4.3 Contributing to society

Many of the employees stressed the importance of contributing to society. Kenny emphasized this by revealing that most employees serve on outside boards, observing that employees are expected to commit themselves to serving and providing value to society by doing community work:

We want people that are involved in a community ... Everyone you talk to is on some outside boards ... [In the] meeting I was in [earlier in the morning] there were ... twenty people in the room ... It was about getting eighth-grade students exposed to more career opportunities ... especially minority kids.

Employees talked about being encouraged to find ways to attend to societal needs that tie into their work lives. Jordan, who had recently returned from volunteering work in South Africa, reflected on how the company supports and encourages such work: "They [the managers] know that being involved in ... humanitarian types of work is important to me and they allow that." Jordan believes that participating in community work is fulfilling for the employees since it is something they are passionate about. Jordan also feels that engaging in such activities is important.

The company supports this behavior and encourages employees to care for the interests of others, both within and outside the workplace. Employees find this experience beneficial as it gives them a sense of purpose at work and allows them to make a difference, thereby making their work life more meaningful. The company formally encourages these activities through employee training programs. As Rachel explained, "[At Temp Academy], they do have classes specific to engineers, specific to architects, they also do general classes ... [that are] community-involvement-related."

The employees revealed that it feels natural for them to contribute to society by supporting good causes. Therefore, they are motivated to behave in this way both at work and outside of their workplace. As stated by Rudy, "We think that community service is important for us and we really want to do it."

5 Discussion

This study aimed to explore employees' experiences of practicing servant leadership in a servant leadership-devoted organization. The study found that employees at Temp carefully select customers who align with the organization's principles of servant leadership, which includes a focus on partnership and collaboration to achieve long-term goals for both parties. This approach leads to a relationship built on trust, respect, and care for each other. It involves meeting each other's needs by both serving and leading, as employees strive to *balance the needs of their colleagues and customers* while also contributing to society at large.

5.1 Selecting customers in line with the practice of servant leadership

The theme "selecting customers in line with the practice of servant leadership" reveals that the employees believe that cautiously selecting customers is crucial for the collaborative practice of servant leadership. The employees use the combination of serving and leading as a framework, as underlined in their focus on meeting each other's needs, by both serving and leading, for their customer selection procedure. This approach enables employees to be dedicated to their practice and mindset of servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019) as it supports their aim to realize the company's vision and long-term goal of providing value to society (Beck, 2014; Sendjaya, 2010; Spears, 1998) through stewardship (Crippen and Willows, 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011). Being willing to provide community services is highlighted in numerous studies (e.g., Beck, 2014; Crippen and Willows, 2019; Wu et al., 2021). Temp's customer selection criteria and practices are noteworthy and important theoretical and practical contributions, and to our best knowledge, have not been considered in previous studies on servant leadership.

The employees view the principle of selecting customers as foundational for building relationships with them based on looking out for each other, including trusting and respecting one another, elements upon which servant leaders focus (Greenleaf, 2002). These elements are underlined in Laub's characteristics of valuing people, referring to trusting others and showing

care and compassion, and displaying authenticity, which, among other things, includes being able to maintain trust in relationships (Laub, 1999).

As previously researched by Beck (2014) and Crippen and Willows (2019), employees in this study view servant leaders as those who aim to serve their communities. If a customer is unwilling to collaborate in this manner, selecting them is not considered feasible as it would limit the organization's potential to have a positive impact on society and thus work towards long-term goals. This would also affect the delivery of beneficial results to all stakeholders, including providing value to society and being socially responsible. The concept of stewardship, as emphasized by van Dierendonck (2011), is crucial in this regard. In such cases, Temp's employees either cease working with the customer or recommend the services of other organizations.

This approach means that Temp can potentially lose customers who lack a long-term vision to provide community services or do not seek a partnership based on receiving advice or input from others, as they avoid customers who may want Temp to comply with their requests. The employees feel that this procedure is important for taking good care of their customers, an outlook supported by studies linking servant leadership with the importance of servicing customers (Aribi et al., 2024; Aryee et al., 2023; Coetzer, 2018; Heine et al., 2023; Liden et al., 2014). According to the reports of the employees, their primary objective is to ensure the satisfaction of their customers. They aim to establish a trustworthy relationship with the customers, which can lead to a long-term partnership where both parties can achieve their business goals. These intentions align with the findings of Carter and Baghurst (2014) about how employees strive to serve customers while also keeping the organizational objectives in mind.

Likewise, this procedure demonstrates employees' courage, as they do not hesitate to cut ties with customers who do not fit their selection criteria. These findings relate to courage as part of van Dierendonck's (2011) model of servant leadership, and demonstrated in the characteristic of authenticity, being true to oneself and doing what one promises (van Dierendonck, 2011); the findings also correspond to the characteristic of providing leadership, which entails having the courage to make decisions (Laub, 1999). The employees have confidence in this approach, as they believe it has delivered them repeat customers and helped them to establish long-term business partnerships. They believe this leads to more prosperity for the organization in the long run, providing insight into how establishing trust in relationships is part of servant leadership, in line with the characteristic of valuing people (Laub, 1999).

5.2 Fulfilling the needs of customers and employees

In the theme "fulfilling the needs of customers and employees," many employees identified listening as a key practice for understanding and fulfilling important needs, which they experience as one of their main responsibilities at work. Attending to needs in this way can be linked to several studies demonstrating that one of the main concerns of servant leaders is to care for their fellow workers and listen to them to understand their needs and concerns (Gunnarsdóttir, 2014; Ragnarsson et al., 2018; van Dierendonck, 2011). The employees associate this practice with putting themselves in the shoes of their co-workers and customers, which enables them to collaborate with their customers to solve their problems.

The employees' objective is to meet the important needs of their customers and build long-term relationships and expect such relationships to produce positive effects for themselves, their customers, and the community. This aim coincides with Greenleaf's (2009) emphasis on having a purpose and vision, thereby establishing long-term goals that deliver beneficial results for all stakeholders.

The goal of fulfilling their customers' needs means for Temps' employees that their work life revolves around finding ways to both serve and lead when working on projects with their preferred customers, exploring the best ways to help these clients (i.e., serving) and working with them towards achieving expected goals and vision (i.e., leading). This cooperative ap-

proach accords with the importance that servant leaders place on including both serving and leading (Ragnarsson et al., 2018). This goal is also underlined in van Dierendonck's model (2011) emphasizing that servant leaders are motivated to both serve and lead, for example, demonstrated by listening to customers (van Dierendonck, 2011) and accepting responsibility and being accountable (Gunnarsdóttir, 2014; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017). Furthermore, these two core elements of servant leadership can be linked to Laub's model (1999), namely, the characteristics of valuing and developing people, providing leadership and building community. This belief, on focusing on customers' needs, underlines that the typical structure of the organizational pyramid must be inverted to enable employees to know and fulfill customers' needs (Blanchard, 2018).

Temp's employees' aims to fulfill their fellow employees' needs reveal that employees enjoy working together, fostering a family-like environment, which means they care for one another, show interest in the work of their fellow employees, and are willing to help whenever necessary. These practices are well documented in former studies and, for example, can be linked to Carter and Baghurst's (2014) findings, which show that servant leadership involves people cooperating to create positive working relationships. This approach is also supported by Ragnarsson et al.'s (2018) study, which shows that people assist each other at work.

These practices are also consistent with servant leaders' aim for effective collaboration (Irving and Longbotham, 2007), to share leadership, and to demonstrate humility (Laub, 1999) as the employees trust and depend on each other, they accept their limitations and acknowledge that they cannot succeed at work by doing everything themselves. These practices are supported by Greenleaf's ideas (2002) that servant leaders are not expected to know all things and do everything themselves; they realize that all individuals are important and have different strengths and weaknesses.

The above further underpins the importance of mutual support and collaboration and the principle of leading through service which helps the employees to have a sense of purpose and meaning at work (Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017). This outlook can be related to several studies that underline the importance of the welfare of people in the workplace and emphasize that servant leaders want their fellow employees to succeed at work (e.g., Beck, 2014; McCallaghan et al., 2020; Ragnarsson et al., 2018; Zarei et al., 2022).

The employees' importance of addressing customers' needs is also highlighted in earlier studies about servant leadership (e.g., Carter and Baghurst, 2014; Coetzer, 2018; Wu et al., 2013), and Liden et al. (2014) proposed that employees who are treated as part of the in-group with customers may provide a better service. However, a fundamental element in many previous studies on servant leadership is that employees come first, meaning that fulfilling employees' interests and needs are seen as a priority (e.g., Barnabas and Sundararajan, 2012; Flynn et al., 2016; Liden, Panaccio et al., 2014).

Given the prime focus on employees' needs in previous studies on servant leadership, the current findings show, in addition to the emphasis on the employees, the heavy emphasis on the selection of the company's customers and the criterion for the selection is noteworthy. The findings indicate that there is equal devotion to fulfilling the needs of fellow employees and the needs of customers. This is an important theoretical and practical contribution and to our knowledge, this combined approach to servant leadership has not been presented in previous studies.

5.3 Contributing to society

The findings related to the theme "contributing to society" indicate that employees care about the interests of people outside of their organization as they are passionate about the well-being of others in society. This can be linked to one of the core aspects of servant leadership, namely *having a sincere interest in others and serving others' needs* as well as being in line with Greenleaf's belief that a company's long-term vision should generate positive outcomes for all stakeholders and society in general (1970).

The employees' focus on motivation for providing help, volunteering outside the workplace, and showing social responsibility is well documented in the servant leadership literature (Eva et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2021) and corresponds to Greenleaf's (1970) aforementioned best test. This is also in line with the concept of authenticity; corresponding to servant leaders demonstrating integrity and acting in honest ways (van Dierendonck, 2011) as well as being supported by the notion that servant leaders aim to service all stakeholders and show accountability towards them (Gunnarsdóttir, 2014; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017).

According to Laub's (1999) model, the concept of "contributing to society" is an essential aspect of servant leadership. This idea is closely related to valuing people, which includes showing care and compassion towards others; developing people, which involves serving in the community and helping individuals grow; building community, which entails helping people build stronger relationships; and providing leadership, which involves assisting others in achieving their vision and goals.

Furthermore, the expressed desire to make a difference and have a chance to contribute to society by increasing the prosperity of others is linked to the servant leadership concept of stewardship (Crippen and Willows, 2019; Spears, 1998; van Dierendonck, 2011), that can be related to showing responsibility towards society at large and addressing people's needs outside the workplace. Similarly, the employees' wishes and expectations to have a meaningful work life and a sense of purpose can be linked to stewardship including the obligation to act in a responsible manner and have a positive effect on the community (Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017); thus, enabling serving a higher purpose and giving followers' work a meaning (Greenleaf, 2003; Sendjaya, 2010).

5.4 Theoretical and practical implications

To sum up, this study provides valuable insights into the *theory of servant leadership*. The findings reveal two crucial aspects of servant leadership that were previously overlooked. Firstly, although former research highlights the connection between servant leadership and the significance of customer service (e.g., Aryee et al., 2023; Heine et al., 2023; Shafiq and Khan, 2024), this study shows that Temp's customers are meticulously chosen in alignment with the company's fundamental principles of servant leadership. This sheds new light on the relationship with customers as there is no previous evidence that practicing servant leadership may, in some ways, rely on the customers.

Secondly, the research highlights that at Temp, practicing servant leadership involves equally prioritizing the needs of both customers and employees, fostering a unified partnership between them. To the best of our knowledge, previous servant leadership studies have not presented the importance of selecting customers in line with servant leadership and attending equally to employee and customer needs, resulting in employees and customers merging together in a fruitful and long-term partnership where they can practice servant leadership together.

The findings in this study reveal Temp's employees' practice of servant leadership and yield several *practical implications*. The theme "Selecting customers in line with the practice of servant leadership" demonstrates that establishing a close partnership with customers may be an effective way to involve them in practicing servant leadership.

"Fulfilling the needs of customers and employees," which is the second theme, indicates the value of focusing equally on the needs of both parties. It is thus helpful to educate employees in the fields of business communication and service management, for example, to help them understand and manage customers' expectations. Accordingly, employees should be encouraged to assist each other at work and to go beyond what is specified in their job descriptions if they feel doing so is warranted by circumstances.

Finally, the third theme, "contributing to society," demonstrates the value of encouraging employees to participate in community services. Accordingly, showing care for people outside the office is valued within the workplace, and employees are supported to take on volunteer work.

6 Conclusion

Our study extends the understanding and knowledge of employees' experiences of the practice of servant leadership, showing that selecting customers in alignment with the company's practice of servant leadership and equal devotion to fulfilling the needs of customers and employees allows the organization to merge with their customers into a holistic and fruitful partnership. This unified collaboration is based on the care, trust, and mutual respect that enables employees and customers to practice servant leadership together effectively.

This study included employees from one servant leadership organization in the business sector that seems to work closely with its customers, which are primarily non-profit organizations that aim to have a positive influence in the community. This may be considered a limitation, and studying other servant leadership companies may reveal other experiences. For example, a study where employees do not have a close relationship with their customers and/or work for a servant leadership organization in the consumer business may show different findings. Similarly, studies of the experience of employees in servant leadership organizations seeking to serve mainly for-profit organizations may also reveal different experiences.

Furthermore, the participating organization publicly professed that it formally practiced servant leadership. However, the intention is not to verify that the organization practices servant leadership or claim that it indeed does so. For instance, the aim is not to verify or confirm that everything it does is part of servant leadership. However, what it does is based on the experience of employees who believe their practice, as revealed in the themes, is part of servant leadership. This means their servant leadership practices are based on their own valuations and reporting. In this context, it should be noted that there may also be value in exploring organizations that have not openly stated that they practice servant leadership, as well as investigating organizations where their practice of servant leadership may have emerged organically instead of formally.

In light of this study's findings, it would be interesting to conduct research on the interactions and collaboration between employees and different types of customers in the context of practicing servant leadership. This study further suggests the need for investigation into the role of customers in the practice of the concept. For instance, do employees working for servant leadership organizations in different types of businesses handle or work with their customers in dissimilar ways? Also, servant leadership is supposed to be useful in all situations (Greenleaf, 2002; Ragnarsson et al., 2018; Sipe and Frick, 2009) but does collaborating with customers rely on any situational factors? Finally, it might be valuable to explore how servant leadership coincides with the concept of customer relationship management (CRM). The preceding exploration of the experience of employees' servant leadership practices indicates the value of continued research in this area.

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