

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AS AN IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTIC FOR BASKETBALL COACHES AND BUSINESS LEADERS

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Abstract: *Business and basketball organizations, although different from the point of view of their activity, have various similar characteristics. One of these characteristics is the fact that leaders can be found in both business and basketball teams. In addition, leadership is a much-researched aspect in both areas. The article focuses on servant leadership as it can help coaches and business leaders become more effective, it can allow them to help develop others more efficiently and thus, it can help them in gaining the trust of their followers, which can then lead to an improvement on the part of the team's performance. That is why the aim of this paper is to provide an insight into how and why servant leadership can be considered an important characteristic for basketball coaches, business leaders and their respective organizations. By undergoing a literature review analysis on the topic of servant leadership in basketball and business, various similar aspects between coaches and business leaders have been identified. The results show that basketball coaches and business leaders are more easily followed, trusted, and respected if they apply a servant leadership style. More so, as some researchers pointed out, this servant leadership characteristic of basketball coaches and business leaders is yet to be fully accepted as a model for successful leadership in sport and not enough research has been undergone in order to examine how servant leadership affects the organizational culture. This can be considered as the main reason why further research on the topic is needed.*

Keywords: *servant leadership; basketball; coaching; business.*

JEL classification: *M12; M19*

1. Introduction

Basketball is one of the most played sports on the planet. According to the general rules provided by the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) Basketball is a sport that is played by two opposing teams each made up of five players to cover each of the five different positions. Each team is trained, developed and led by a head coach together with his coaching staff. Although in a staff there are also assistant coaches, all with various training responsibilities, we will focus this research mainly on the head coach. The head coach of a basketball club is one of the employees that are primarily responsible for the performance of the organization. According to Sampaio et al, "understanding performance in high-level basketball is a very complex process to understand because of its dependency on a substantial number of dynamical interactions between technical, tactical, fitness and anthropometric characteristics of players." (Sampaio et al., 2018) As we can see in the previous statement, the performance of a basketball team is mainly attributed to the players. However, in order for these players to become an effective, efficient and cohesive team they must be led by a coach. How do coaches train, develop and lead these players, from the perspective of being servant leaders, is what I wanted to find out throughout this research. One way through which they can do this is through applying a servant leadership style. Thus, a variety of articles on this topic indicated that servant leadership of basketball coaches could be considered as an important characteristic for them to have in order to achieve the desired performance.

Business and basketball organizations alike, although different from the point of view of their activity have various similar characteristics (ex.: in organizational structure, team types, human

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resources etc.). One of these characteristics is the fact that leaders can be found in both business and basketball teams. In addition, leadership is a much-researched aspect in both business and sports (basketball) areas. If we analyze the case of a multinational corporation, we can find a number of leaders varying from CEO to a simple team leader. Thus, because of the size of the business corporations, the number of leaders employed is much greater than the one found in basketball organizations. In this regard, and in order to achieve a better comparison between the two categories at hand, we will focus the current research on those leaders from multinational corporations that have technical and disciplinary responsibilities over the employees as this will provide a better base for this analysis.

On the one hand, Alvehus wrote that leadership is a phenomenon without which human society cannot function. (Alvehus, 2021) Setyaningrum et al wrote that *“Every organization needs a leader, and, in these times of uncertainty caused by the additional demands that globalization is putting on businesses, stakeholders need to be able to count on an effective leader.”* (Setyaningrum et al., 2020) One way in which a leader can be effective is by applying a servant leadership style. Furthermore, according to the literature on hand, leadership can be categorized in various types, as the research on this topic has proven throughout the years. One of these types is the so-called servant leadership, which can be considered to be an important characteristic for basketball coaches and business leaders alike to have. This type of leadership can help coaches and business leaders become more effective, it can allow them to help develop others more efficiently and thus, it can allow them to gain the trust of their followers, which can then lead to an improvement on the part of the team’s performance. That is why the aim of this paper is to provide an insight into how and why servant leadership can be considered an important characteristic for basketball coaches and business leaders. Thus, this study will contribute to the further development of theory on the topic of servant leadership and its application, and respectively its effects on the team, organization, follower performance and so on.

2. What is servant leadership?

As the years went by and organizations, be it in basketball or business, have developed, they have also recognized that the leadership styles of their leaders need to change in order to fit to the new market needs. Thus, according to Rieke et al *“traditional hierarchical models of leadership are yielding to newer models.”* (Rieke et al., 2008) One such new model is the servant leadership style. Servant leadership is a leadership style that has been around for a while as Robert Greenleaf defined it back in 1970. According to the Robert Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership through servant leadership, we can understand *“a non-traditional leadership philosophy, embedded in a set of behaviors and practices that place the primary emphasis on the well-being of those being served.”* One of the most important characteristics of the servant leadership style is, according to Van Dierendonck, to put the interest of others before one’s self interest. (Van Dierendonck, 2011) Patterson has also analyzed this aspect in comparison to the transformational leadership style and wrote that while *“transformational leaders strive to align follower’s interest to the leaders own personal interests and to those of the organization, the servant leaders focus on serving their followers individually.”* (Patterson, 2003) Furthermore, according to the Robert Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, the author of this leadership style *“recognized the fact that organizations as well as individuals could be servant-leaders”*. This analysis of the literature on servant leadership will thus continue with the characteristics of servant leaders in order to have a better understanding on how one can recognize a servant leader in a basketball or business organization.

3. What are the characteristics of servant leaders?

Firstly, as previously presented, the servant leader leads by establishing various opportunities for development of the followers inside of the organization. (Luthans & Avolio in (Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014)) Because of this aspect, it is important to analyze, describe and review the characteristics of a servant leader. This activity has preoccupied many researchers such as (Russell & Stone, 2002),

(Barbuto Jr & Wheeler, 2006) or (Van Dierendonck, 2011) during the last ten or more years. A summary of the works on servant leadership conducted by the previously mentioned researchers can be found in the following table. According to Parris and Peachey all these reviews are primarily “different interpretations of Greenleaf’s writings that include the fundamental dimension of servanthood or the willingness to serve others.” (Parris & Peachey, 2013)

Table 1: Summary of characteristics of servant leaders

Characteristic	Author
Vision	(Russell & Stone, 2002)
Honesty	
Integrity	
Trust	
Service	
Modeling	
Pioneering	
Appreciation of others	
Empowerment	
Altruistic calling	
Emotional healing	
Persuasive mapping	
Wisdom	
Organizational stewardship	(Van Dierendonck, 2011)
Empowering and developing people	
Humility	
Authenticity	
Interpersonal acceptance	
Providing direction	
Stewardship	
Building a community	Larry Spears in (Rieke et al., 2008)
Stewardship	
Awareness	
Listening	
Conceptualization	
Healing	
Empathy	
Persuasion	
Commitment to the growth of people	(Blanchard & Broadwell, 2021)
Empathy	
Healing	
Awareness	
Persuasion	
Conceptualization	
Foresight	
Stewardship	
Commitment to the growth of people	
Building community	

Source: Authors own representation according to the above-mentioned sources

Another point of view regarding the characteristics of servant leaders comes from Robinson et al who divide these characteristics into three levels (Robinson et al., 2018):

- Core – altruistic calling.
- Central – enduring attributes (ex.: humility, empathy, genuine caring).

- Contextual – which are based on various contextual characteristics and variables, and leader capabilities (ex.: vision, wisdom, developing people, stewardship, persuasion etc.).

As we can see in the above-mentioned information, there are some characteristics such as stewardship, developing people, or providing direction and others that have been described under different names but which in the end represent the same aspect, which can be found in the works of several researchers. This proves the importance and validity of these characteristics for the servant leadership style.

Secondly, how do servant leaders use these characteristics? An answer to this is the fact that *“followers are given clear job descriptions, or roles, and the job of the leader is to “serve” or to help them in executing those roles.”* (Rieke et al., 2008) Thus, through their day-to-day activity in which they are “serving” others, they apply various characteristics like those mentioned in table 1. Moreover, according to the Robert Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, a servant leader *“focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the “top of the pyramid,” servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible.”* Therefore, in order to be able to do all of this, a servant leader needs to be aware of these characteristics, which also need to be further developed in time in order to be more effective and efficient as a leader.

4. Servant leadership and organizational commitment

Before we move on to how servant leaders can be recognized in basketball and business organizations it is important to understand the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment. As Mazarei et al wrote, *“Servant leadership as a new style of leadership in organizations can promote performance of the members of organization through training attitudes and working behaviors of employees.”* (Mazarei et al., 2013) In this regard, according to Setyaningrum et al and Hannay when the servant leadership style is applied, organizational commitment and trust in the leadership team will increase and the employee performance will improve. (Setyaningrum et al., 2020) (Hannay, 2009) Moreover, as Jacob noted, the servant leadership style has an influence on the commitment of the follower’s which is positively related to their performance. (Jacobs, 2006)

According to Carter, servant leadership is not necessarily a style but a leadership philosophy surrounding various ethical situations, customer experience and employee commitment while in the same time it creates a unique organization. The organization that Carter describes is also one in which leaders and followers alike can unite in order to achieve the desired and established goals of the organization and one in which the employees are considered to be the most important asset of the organization. (Carter, 2012) However, a study conducted by Rimes revealed the fact that although a relationship between servant leadership and the commitment of employees existed, a correlation between this leadership style and the retention or employee continuity in organization could not be identified. (Rimes, 2011) In addition, a study conducted by Drury revealed the fact that servant leadership might lead to an *“inverse correlation that may indicate that servant leaders create a climate of growth in the individual that leads to self-efficacy beliefs.”* An example of this has been provided in Drury’s study where he wrote that an employee might think that: *“I am pretty good at this work and have developed so much that I’m now capable of brokering my abilities elsewhere.”* Drury concludes this idea by writing that if this happens, *“employees in servant-led organizations may become more committed to their individual job, but less so to the organization.”* (Drury, 2004)

As we can see, there have been various research during the years about the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment. Some proved that the relation is a positive one, others underlined the fact that this might lead to a situation where the employee views himself or herself as being “too good for the organization”. In this case, we might find that a separation between the employee and the organization happens. This is where the servant leader needs to act to ensure that the employee stays committed not only to the job that they have to do but also to

the organization. Furthermore, we will continue our review from the point of view of the positive aspects and effects that the servant leadership style has for basketball coaches and business leaders in organizations.

5. Servant leader or manager

If in basketball we have a clear distinction between a coach and a manager and their respective responsibilities, in business the terms leader and manager often lead to a confusion and more, they are also used interchangeably although they represent different things. Thus, it is necessary to explain the differences between a servant leader and a manager. In this regard, Benson and Peprah wrote a comprehensive review on the topic that we will briefly summarize in table 2.

Table 2: Differences between servant leaders and managers

Servant leaders	Managers
Excel in dynamic, complex environments.	Excel in maintaining the status quo.
Main goal: serve the follower’s interests.	Main goal: serve the organization interests.
Assist, develop, and give followers a purpose in order for them to give their best.	Because of their result driven and often controlling attitude they instill fear of failure in their followers.
Are vision oriented and have a good understanding of the big picture.	Develop the current situation, they carry out plans while not necessarily having or understanding the big picture for the organization.
Focused on the continuous development of their followers.	Focused on the present results their followers obtain.
Prioritizes relationships over results.	Prioritizes results over relationships.
Do the right things in leadership.	Do the right things in the operational activity.

Source: Authors own representation according to (Benson & Peprah, 2021)

Regarding this comparison, Hunter wrote that in many situations he found himself, he talked with people that were skeptical about servant leadership as they do not trust this type of leadership. However, he continues to describe a very interesting point about servant leaders that I would like to present in full: *“Servant leadership does not allow one to abdicate his or her leadership responsibility to define the mission, set the rules governing behavior, set standards, and define accountability. The servant leader does not commission a poll, conduct a committee meeting, or have a democratic vote to determine the answers to these questions. Indeed, people look to the leader to provide this direction. However, once this direction has been provided, it becomes time to turn the organizational structure upside down and help people win! The leadership now becomes responsive to those being led by identifying and meeting their legitimate needs so they can become the best they are capable of becoming and effectively accomplish the stated mission.”* (Hunter, 2004)

Considering the previous presented information, it is also important to underline the fact that a person that is a leader can also be a good manager and a manager can also be a good leader. The question is not which one is better but, how one person can be both? Also, another important question to answer is when should a person be a leader and when a manager? However, these questions require a more in-depth analysis on the topic at hand in order to be properly answered. In addition, a combination of the two can help lead people more effectively and help turn them into cohesive teams. Furthermore, it is important to note that inside of an organization, be it basketball or business, one can find leaders on every hierarchical level (top-middle-low management, or even in between the members of a team). What kind of leadership style each person chooses to apply is also dependent on various factors. However, regardless of the leadership style chosen, the goal should be the same: to have a more efficient, effective, and productive workforce in order to be able to achieve the desired results. Thus, as Hammermeister et al wrote, by quoting McGee-Cooper and Trammell, servant leadership can be analyzed from the perspective of a “tool” that could be used in order to *“turn those traditional notions of leadership and organizational structure upside down and provide the needed context for a more satisfied and productive workforce.”* (Hammermeister et al., 2008) In this regard,

we can state that servant leadership can be considered one of the optimal leadership styles for leaders that want to achieve the organizations established goals whilst developing their followers.

6. Servant leadership in basketball and business

Because the aim of this paper is to provide an insight into how and why servant leadership can be considered an important characteristic for basketball coaches, business leaders and their respective organizations it is thus important to understand how we can recognize servant leaders in these two areas of activity. One way would be to be aware of the characteristics of servant leaders, presented in the third point in this article, and to “look for them” in the respective leaders. There are various examples of servant leaders in basketball. For example, in an article entitled “*The servant leadership of John Calipari*” (basketball coach at the University of Kentucky) written by Benjamin Leayle for Penn State University she quotes Ken Blanchard that says about coach Calipari that he “*proves season after season that you can lead and serve at the same time.*” Furthermore, in the same article we can see a proof of this. When asked about how he felt after winning the 2012 national championship, coach Calipari said: “*This is not about me. This is about these thirteen players*”. Another example of how important servant leadership in basketball is comes from an article written by Jenkins where the author pointed out the fact that John Wooden became a great coach only after he understood and embodied what means to be a servant leader. John Wooden was according to the same article a three-time All-American basketball player at Purdue University and the only man who has been elected to college basketball’s hall of fame as both a player and a coach. (Jenkins, 2014)

Furthermore, to become an even better servant leader, there are some questions that a basketball coach can reflect on, as formulated by Weber, Gradert and Brown in a 2020 White Paper for Sports Leadership at University of Texas:

- *What is my purpose and reason for coaching?*
- *Are the athletes my main priority?*
- *How can I better prepare my athletes for life outside of athletics?*
- *Am I instilling important values in my athletes?*
- *Am I prepared to have great success and not seek any credit for it?*

As stated in the previous point, leaders can be found at every hierarchical level even inside the team. A great example of such a servant basketball leader is the former (17-year career) NBA player Tim Duncan. An article written by Quinn McDowell for Team Snap proves exactly this aspect. He writes about Duncan that he not only played a huge role in the success of the San Antonio Spurs but that he showed characteristics of a servant leadership style during his stay in San Antonio. For example, the article states that Duncan was a flexible player that did not request the organization should trade for other specific players so that he has better teammates, and that he was not threatened by the transfer of other important role players such as Tony Parker or Manu Ginobili.

In basketball winning is important for everyone in the organization. However, for a servant leader, “*winning is simply viewed as a by-product of athlete development*”, as the results of a study conducted by Westre showed. (Westre, 2008) Moreover, according to Durden, the research regarding servant leadership in coaching isn’t as extensively studied as it should be. (Durden, 2016) Although, there are various practical examples regarding servant leadership in basketball, the topic could undergo a separate and more in-depth analysis in order to research the importance that it has.

When researching about servant leadership in business a variety of articles could be found. Some of them have already been referenced in the previous paragraphs of this article. In addition to those articles, another important aspect of servant leadership in business is the fact that it is a lot more difficult to apply in comparison to other leadership styles. The reason for this is, according to Patterson, quoted by Gandolfi et al, the fact that it is generally easier to have followers comply that it is to inspire them and to have them willingly accept the daily requirements of the job / team / organization. (Gandolfi et al., 2017) If in basketball, we found several examples of coaches and players that are servant leaders, in business the situation is quite different as because of the size of

the companies' studies in specific persons inside these organization are quite difficult to be conducted. However, there are several companies that promote a servant leadership style such as:

- FedEx: People – Service – Profit philosophy
- Marriott: People first philosophy
- Starbucks: Culture of inclusion and social responsibility that is rooted in a servant leadership style

Out of these three companies, we can point out to one servant leader: Kevin Johnson, the CEO of Starbucks. In an article written by Kate Cooper for Forbes she underlines the fact that the outgoing chairman of the company Howard Schultz, considers Johnson to be a servant leader. So, as we can see, servant leaders can be found both in basketball and business organization. But are there any differences between them? An answer to this question cannot be formulated at the time this article was written and I think that this could be a topic for further research.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this paper was to provide an insight into how and why servant leadership can be considered an important characteristic for basketball coaches, business leaders and their respective organizations. As we could see at point 3, there is a variety of characteristics that a servant leader has. By applying, these characteristics into practice in the day-to-day activities' servant leaders manage to become more easily followed, trusted, and respected. Servant leadership can be thus considered as an important characteristic for basketball coaches and business leaders. Furthermore, although there are some differences between what a servant leader and manager represent, it is also important to underline the fact that a person that is a leader can also be a good manager and a manager can also be a good leader. In this regard, there is however a need for a more in-depth analysis on when a person should be a leader and when a manager. More so, as we saw in the previous point, there are various examples of successful servant leaders in basketball and business organizations. A question that arises is if there are any differences between servant leaders from the two analyzed domains. This does not only show the limitations of this article but could also be considered as another aspect that can be further researched on the matter on hand.

Since its conceptualization by Robert Greenleaf, the impact of servant leadership in organizations has long been researched and proven. However, there are certain aspects that have not been sufficiently addressed in the research. For example, the impact of servant leadership on the retention of basketball players is a topic that could undergo a more in-depth analysis. More so, it is important to note, as some researchers pointed out, that servant leadership of basketball coaches and business leaders is yet to be fully accepted as a model for successful leadership in sport and not enough research has been undergone in order to examine how servant leadership affects the organizational culture. This can be considered as the main reasons why further research on the topic is needed. Nevertheless, servant leadership can be viewed as an important characteristic for basketball coaches and business leaders as it helps them in developing their followers and in achieving the organizations goals.

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