

Mentorship Through the Lens of Servant Leadership: The Importance of Accountability and Empowerment¹

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Abstract

Connecting with the Millennial Generation can be challenging, as this generation is often described as unmotivated, incoherent and lazy. Servant leadership focuses on placing the needs of the follower before the needs of the leader, and empowers followers to take ownership for their efforts. Implementing quality mentorship through the lens of servant leadership could be a missing link to connecting purpose to content in college classrooms. The study describes first-semester students' perceptions of servant leadership in personal mentors at the beginning and end of the Fall 2014 Freshmen Orientation course in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Oklahoma State University. Students rated accountability and empowerment as the highest servant leadership traits desired in their personal mentors in both the pre- and post-evaluations. The study yielded the following recommendations: Higher education institutions should develop student leadership groups around desired servant leadership qualities, such as accountability and empowerment; implement projects and assignments in classroom settings allowing students to take ownership of personal work; and investigate the influence of servant leadership in various college student settings. As the needs of college students evolve, the need to embrace student ownership and service in higher education programs becomes imperative.

Introduction

Today's undergraduate students are labeled one of the most lost, unmotivated and lazy generations to enter a college classroom (Elmore and Maxwell, 2008; Levine and Dean, 2012). In a 2007 report, the American College Health Association (2008) stated 93% of college students reported being overwhelmed by the college lifestyle; 44% claimed feeling signs of depression in college; 16% struggled with relationships in college and nearly 10% of students contemplated the thought of suicide.

In addition, by 2030, individuals from the Millennial Generation will likely outnumber Baby Boomers by nearly 22 million people (Meyer, 2014). Exposure to life-mentors, peer-mentors and staff at higher education institutions likely could help develop future generations and leaders focused on serving others (Astin and Astin, 2000; Campbell et al., 2012; Parks, 2000).

Investing in younger generations is crucial to ensuring a prosperous future for the country and the world (Upcraft et al., 2005). Across the globe, less than one in six people have graduated from college (Elmore, 2015). As such, challenging and investing in first-year college students is critical to the success of higher education institutions and to the future of humanity (Maxwell, 1999; Upcraft et al., 2005). Yorke and Longden (2004) identified the first year as the most critical year for ensuring student retention. One theory to motivating first-year college students to become more engaged citizens and leaders is through the use of personal mentors (Terrion and Leonard, 2007; Velez et al., 2011). As students' needs evolve over time, high-quality mentors will distinguish themselves from average mentors by how well they set an example of servant leadership for their mentees, their peers and their communities (Liden et al., 2008; Upcraft et al., 2005). Understanding how students perceive and apply personal mentorship could help faculty in higher education understand the roles mentors play in improving student retention (Upcraft et al., 2005).

Academic performance and intrinsic motivation also are influenced by the individual mentors' leadership style (Campbell et al., 2012; Terrion and Leonard, 2007). Millennials desire being coached and mentored (Elmore and Maxwell, 2008). Unfortunately, few studies have evaluated how servant leadership qualities vary with the different types of mentors (Terrion and Leonard, 2007). The lack of research supporting effective mentorship styles combined with the gap of understanding the perceptions of followers when evaluating servant

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leadership (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011) provide a significant opportunity for future research in the development of first-year students (Upcraft, et al., 2005). Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) firmly state the perspective of the follower on a servant leader's behavior is missing.

Objectives

The following objectives were developed to guide this study:

1. Describe the selected characteristics (age, sex, and ethnicity) of incoming students in the Fall 2014 OSU CASNR – Freshman Orientation class (AG 1011).
2. Compare differences in incoming students' perceptions of servant leadership traits in personal mentors at the beginning and end of the AG 1011 course in the Fall 2014.

Limitations

The following limitations were identified for this study:

1. The study is designed to describe incoming students' perceptions of servant leadership traits identified in students' personal mentors. Perceptions of servant leadership can be influenced by many variables, not just personal mentorship.
2. The results, findings, and conclusions related to servant leadership constructs in this study cannot be generalized to other populations.

Millennial Generation

Generations are defined by shared experiences within specific time periods and are often influenced by people, places, events and social references (Elam et al., 2007). Howe and Strass (2000) stated most of the current U.S. population is made up of five generations: the G.I. Generation (born between 1901 to 1924), the Silent Generation (1925–1942), the Baby Boomer Generation (1943–1960), Generation X (1961–1981) and the Millennial Generation (1982–2002). According to Elmore and Maxwell (2008), the next generation beyond the millennials will be known as Generation iY (born after 2003). However, most students who are enrolled in higher education institutions today are members of the millennial generational cohort (Elam et al., 2007).

First year students face many struggles during this vulnerable time of their lives and they long for guidance more than previous generations (Levine and Dean, 2012). In fact, Yorke and Longden (2004) identified four general reasons a typical student leaves their programs in higher education: (a) a misunderstanding of the program when they enrolled; (b) students' experiences within the program; (c) struggle with adjusting to the demands of the program; and (d) situations in students' lives outside of the program. In addition to the stress of choosing the right program, millennials also face many societal issues unique to their generation (Levine and Dean, 2012):

- Current undergraduates are the first generation of digital natives.
- Millennials are the most demographically diverse generation in the history of higher education.
- Millennials are the most connected generation where students have unlimited access to being wirelessly connected with other people, but the lack of interpersonal and communication skills makes them feel isolated.
- Current undergraduates believe the economy is the most critical issue facing the country's future and nearly two-thirds of undergraduates leave college with substantial student loan debt.
- Millennials are described as a more entitled, immature, dependent and overprotected generation than previous generations.

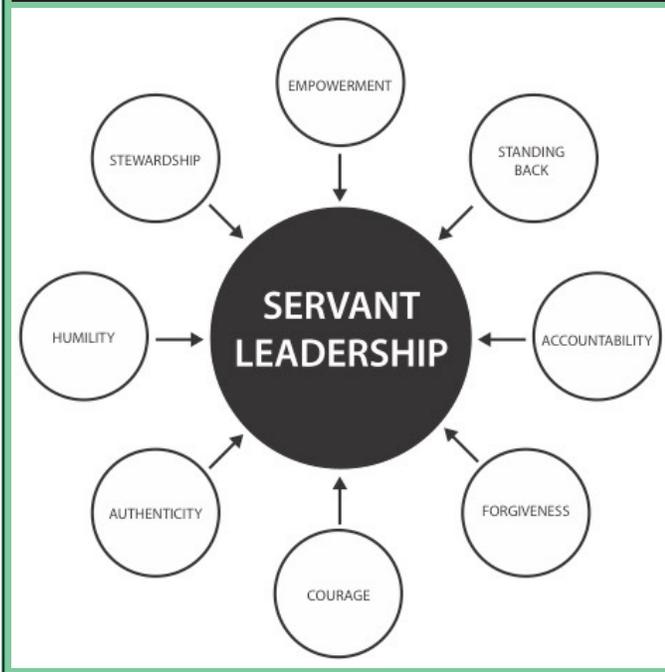
Conceptual Framework Servant Leadership Theory

The main purpose of servant leadership is to serve, empower and challenge followers to become leaders (Daft and Lane, 2011). Greenleaf's discovery of servant leadership sparked a growing field of research interest (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Farling et al., 1999; Page and Wong, 2000; Spears, 2002) and laid the groundwork for developing measurements attempting to define servant leadership (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011). Unfortunately, most attempts to define servant leadership have been inconsistent and without a universal standard of underlining constructs (Liden et al., 2008). Russell and Stone (2002) declared, "*The literature regarding servant leadership is rather indeterminate, somewhat ambiguous, and mostly anecdotal*" (p. 145). As a result, building an all-encompassing, conceptual model for servant leadership becomes difficult when nearly 40 different attributes have been used to describe constructs relating to this theory (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Van Dierendonck, 2011). In an effort to conceptualize the theory of servant leadership, Parris and Peachey (2013) examined servant leadership within an organizational context, but still identified the lack of consistency in the definitions used to conceptualize servant leadership. As such, this study will focus on an operational definition of servant leadership, defined by Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011).

Van Dierendonck and Nuijten's Approach to Servant Leadership

To more clearly define and operationalize characteristics of servant leadership, Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) developed the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) by focusing on transparent servant leadership behavior related to the well-being and performance of followers. The initial development and validation of the SLS involved three-phases: (a) exploring and analyzing factors defining servant leadership; (b) comparing the content validity of the SLS to other servant leadership measures; and (c) correlating the criterion-related

Figure 1. Visual Representation of Van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) units of measure in the SLS Instrument, and the role they play in the Theory of Servant Leadership



validity of how leaders behave toward followers in the workplace (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011).

After differentiating antecedents, behavior and outcomes, six preliminary themes emerged to form an operationalized definition for servant leadership, including empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, intrapersonal acceptance, providing direction and stewardship (Parris and Peachey, 2013; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Selected managers who were labeled as servant leaders by experts from the European Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership were interviewed to seek clarity in the SLS construct development (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011). Subsequently, Van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) six original themes evolved into eight characteristics defining servant leadership, including empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, authenticity, courage, interpersonal acceptance and stewardship (see Figure 1). Each of the eight constructs helps build consistency within the theory of servant leadership.

Methods

This study was conducted as a longitudinal, panel survey design, employed with a census approach (Creswell, 2012) to describe incoming students' perceptions of servant leadership traits in personal mentors at the beginning and end of the Fall 2014 CASNR AG 1011 – Freshmen Orientation class. A census approach was the desirable method to use for the study as the researcher wanted to study the full population of incoming students in the CASNR AG 1011 – Freshmen Orientation class. The instrumentation used in this study included the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) instrument (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011) and a researcher-de-

signed general mentorship and demographic inventory questionnaire (Cramer, 2013; Kimmelshue, 2012). The demographic inventory was only included in the pre-questionnaire.

The data for this study was analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics 21.0 for MacintoshTM. To reduce human error, SPSS was used to analyze data and report descriptive statistics (Field, 2009). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze central tendencies within the data (Creswell, 2012). Research objectives one and two were used for descriptive analysis. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe nominal data within categories (Creswell, 2012). Ordinal, or ranked data (Creswell, 2012), was analyzed using means and standard deviations.

Part 1: Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) Instrument

Several multi-dimensional instruments have been developed to measure servant leadership (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Dennis and Bocarnea, 2005; Laub, 1999; Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011; Wong et al., 2007). Van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) SLS evaluates constructs related to both the leader and the follower while focusing on the follower's perspective of the leader-follower relationship. Prior to taking each questionnaire, students were asked to consider their most influential mentor. Responses for the SLS instrument used a six-point Likert-type scale for each item: strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree and strongly disagree (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

Part 2: General Mentorship and Demographic Inventory Questionnaire

Campbell et al. (2012) and Snowden and Hardy (2012) identified a need for further research on the influence of mentorship in students at the undergraduate level. Therefore, with help from a panel of experts, the researchers refined nine closed-ended and semi-closed questions regarding perceptions of general mentorship to address general mentorships preferences in incoming students in AG 1011. Questions included labeling the category of students' most influential mentors, identifying students' most important quality found in a mentor, identifying how often students seek mentorship, listing the general types of community service in which students are involved and estimating how many hours of community service students have logged within the last month of completing the questionnaire.

To collect self-reported participant demographics, researchers modified nine closed-ended and semi-closed questions adapted from Cramer (2013) and Kimmelshue (2012). Based on Creswell's (2012) recommendation to place sensitive questions after neutral questions in questionnaires, the demographic inventory was included at the end of the pre-questionnaire.

Reliability of the SLS Instrument

The SLS instrument (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011) was developed by an exploratory factor analysis and was further validated by multiple confirmatory factor analyses in the Netherlands and in the United Kingdom. The SLS instrument initially reported a range for internal consistency from 0.69 to 0.95. (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011). Kline (1999) stated internal consistencies below 0.7 could be expected in psychometric constructs because of diversity in the measures. Even still, internal consistency measures for construct reliability ranging from 0.69 to 0.95 between the two original SLS studies raised caution for the current study.

As such, post-hoc reliability scores were run within each subscale construct for the pre- and post-questionnaires. The pre-questionnaire yielded the following Cronbach's alphas: 0.77 for empowerment (7 items), 0.72 for accountability (3 items), 0.53 for standing back (3 items), 0.83 for humility (5 items), 0.49 for authenticity (4 items), 0.53 for courage (2 items), 0.68 for forgiveness (3 items) and 0.52 for stewardship (3 items). The post-questionnaire yielded the following Cronbach's alphas: 0.78 for empowerment (7 items), 0.72 for accountability (3 items), 0.60 for standing back (3 items), 0.83 for humility (5 items), 0.61 for authenticity (4 items), 0.64 for courage (2 items), 0.74 for forgiveness (3 items) and 0.57 for stewardship (3 items).

Caution was warranted because of the lower sub-construct reliability scores. As such, a follow-up exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the data and revealed a one-factor solution responsible for 24% of the variance. Three factors also were cumulatively responsible for 38% of the variance. The exploratory factor analysis of the current data confirmed Van Dierendonck's and Nuijten's (2011) factor analysis of the SLS in a Dutch composite sample where three factors also emerged from their data. From their study, factor one was interpreted as the "leader"-side of servant leadership, which was expressed through high loading of empowerment, accountability, vision and intellectual stimulation (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011). The leader component of servant leadership is identified as enabling followers to set clear goals, provide meaningful work situations and express personal talents (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011). Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) labeled factor two as the "servant"-side of servant leadership, where standing back, humility, authenticity, supportive leadership, and ethical leadership support the willingness to serve others through support and listening. Finally, Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) third factor was identified as the forgiveness factor, where mistakes are recognized as growth opportunities and looking forward is better than looking back.

Recognizing Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) also identified three primary factors in the SLS from an exploratory factor analysis in the Dutch study, and following the low sub-construct reliability scores and exploratory factor analysis

for this study, internal consistency measures for the SLS instrument as a whole was measured. As a result, post hoc Cronbach's alphas of 0.87 and 0.88 were yielded for the pre- and post-questionnaires, respectively.

Results and Discussion

Findings Related to Objective One

Eighty-five percent ($f=369$) of the respondents were 18 years old. The youngest respondents were 18 and the oldest respondent was 30. Fourteen students were pulled from the study for being under 18 years old at the time of the pre-questionnaire. In regards to reporting gender, 29.3% ($f=127$) were male and 70.7% ($f=306$) were female. The top two ethnic groups students identified were Caucasian and Native American or Alaska Native. Three hundred sixty-one students (83.6%) identified most closely to the Caucasian (non-Hispanic) race. Twenty-seven respondents (6.3%) identified as Native American or Alaskan Native.

Findings Related to Objective Two

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare students' perceptions of servant leadership traits in personal mentors at the beginning and end of the CASNR AG 1011 – Freshmen Orientation class. Three measures showed statistical significance: authenticity at $t(398) = -4.218, p < 0.001, r=0.21$; humility at $t(397) = -3.434, p=0.001, r=0.17$ and stewardship at $t(402) = -2.114, p= 0.035, r=0.21$. Although the p -values showed statistical significance for authenticity, humility and stewardship, because of the large population size yielding high degrees of freedom for each pair, the effect sizes were between small and medium effects ($r=0.1$ and $r=0.3$, respectively; Cohen, 1992).

Accountability scored the highest servant leadership construct mean in the pre-questionnaire ($M=5.39, SD=0.60$) and in the post-questionnaire ($M=5.42, SD=0.57$; Table 1). Empowerment was close behind as the second highest rated construct in both the pre-questionnaire ($M=5.29, SD=0.53$) and the post-questionnaires ($M=5.30, SD=0.54$; Table 1). Forgiveness scored the lowest servant leadership construct mean in the pre-questionnaire ($M=4.04, SD=1.092$) and in the post-questionnaire ($M=3.95, SD=1.19$; Table 1).

Table 1. Incoming Students' Perceptions of Servant Leadership Traits in Personal Mentors at the Beginning and End of AG 1011

Construct	f	Pre-Questionnaire		Post-Questionnaire		t	df	p-value	r
		M	SD	M	SD				
Authenticity	399	4.55	0.734	4.71	0.741	-4.218	398	0.000	0.21
Humility	398	4.76	0.795	4.87	0.748	-3.434	397	0.001	0.17
Stewardship	403	5.10	0.624	5.17	0.644	-2.114	402	0.035	0.21
Forgiveness	398	4.04	1.092	3.95	1.190	1.750	397	0.081	0.09
Accountability	392	5.39	0.603	5.42	0.566	-1.008	391	0.314	0.05
Standing Back	402	4.81	0.773	4.84	0.784	-0.888	401	0.375	0.04
Courage	391	4.56	0.899	4.58	0.965	-0.422	390	0.673	0.02
Empowerment	391	5.29	0.525	5.30	0.536	-0.409	390	0.683	0.02

Note. $p < .05$. Students were asked to answer questions based on their most influential mentor at the time of taking each question

Conclusions and Implications

Objective one sought to describe the demographics of the Fall 2014 OSU CASNR – Freshman Orientation class (AG 1011). One finding that emerged from this data is how much of an overwhelming majority Caucasian females account for the population. One idea why males might not enroll in college as frequently as females do is young males often do not see immediate value in attending higher education institutions (Irvine, 2011). One recommendation for encouraging males to enroll in higher education is to ensure the value of their education is discussed prior to enrollment and encourage mentor interaction (College Stats, 2015). Mentorship provides value in engaging students on campus. When students feel connected to the mission of the college, they recognize the need for their education, which in turn, could boost enrollment numbers and maintain retention. This research yields implications for implementing strong mentorship components in higher education. Quality mentors not only improve the experience of education while students already are enrolled, but also it can be a key factor in recruiting. Further research is recommended for evaluating successful recruitment efforts, specifically in target demographics, including diverse ethnic groups and male populations.

One powerful implication of the second objective is the Millennial Generation feels the most successful when they are held accountable and empowered to do quality work (Elmore and Maxwell, 2008). Therefore, higher education institutions should develop mentorship programs that include a feedback component to provide constructive and positive feedback to students. If students feel more empowered and responsible in college, could their confidence and empowerment translate to the work environment, as well? Providing a feedback element to student programs might help millennials receive the development they desire at an earlier age so they could emerge more emotionally ready for their future careers. Providing this critical piece of workplace readiness might be the missing link to motivating students for life beyond college.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were assigned to match the needs of current populations: (1) develop student leadership groups around desired servant leadership qualities, such as accountability and empowerment; (2) implement projects and assignments in college classrooms settings enforcing students to take ownership and be accountable for their personal work; and (3) investigate the influence of servant leadership in various college student settings. Because students desire qualities in mentors, such as accountability and empowerment, leadership groups should be selected based on desired criteria.

Summary

Mentoring the millennial generation has raised huge concerns for educators and employers in the past. Fortunately, connecting with this generation could be as simple as engaging empowerment and accountability within mentor-to-mentee relationships. Mentors work to motivate mentees to hold themselves accountable for their work; therefore, teaching students at an earlier age the value of accountability might lead to more informed decisions in college. Certainly, generational differences may show millennials rate accountability and empowerment differently than older supervisors might. Even still, as the needs of current millennial college students evolve, the need to embrace student ownership and service in higher education programs becomes imperative. Society cannot expect to leave a legacy in this world without investing and mentoring future leaders (Elmore and Maxwell, 2008). The time to invest in tomorrow's leaders by empowering students and holding them accountable for their expectations has never been more prevalent than now.

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