To Be Accountable While Showing Care: The Lived Experience of People in a Servant Leadership Organization

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Abstract

Many organizations attribute their success to the use of servant leadership. However, very few studies have been conducted with the emphasis of understanding what it is like for people to work in servant leadership organizations and how it is practiced. Thus, in-depth interviews were conducted and an observation was performed to explore the lived experience of people, both employees and managers, who work within the business sector where servant leadership has been practiced for decades. Two main themes (and a set of subthemes) emerged from the study: "Accountability as an integral part of the practice of servant leadership" and "People show care and help each other out at work." During a period with new challenges, the balance between the dimensions of "serving" and "leading" became prominent. The findings indicate that both dimensions are important for the prosperity of the organization, although participants experience the "lead" dimension of servant leadership being practiced more than the "serve" dimension. This is important, as much of current thought considers servant leadership to focus more on the "serve" dimension, and thereby to be soft.

Servant leadership is about both "serving" and "leading," while its origin can be traced back to Robert K. Greenleaf and his 1970 article "The servant as leader," which was followed by further publications by the same author (2002). Servant leadership can be considered a philosophy rather than a particular theory of leadership (Prosser, 2010), and according to a recent review of the literature, the emphasis in servant leadership has been on serving others while providing leadership (Parris & Peachey, 2013). There has been an increasing number of published studies on servant leadership in recent years; however, according to our review of the literature, only two studies seem to have been conducted within the business sector that focus on the practice of servant leadership and people's experience of servant leadership (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011). Furthermore, these studies do not seem to include both managers and employees. In servant leadership, the emphasis is equally on followers and leaders (Greenleaf, 2008), and in the field of leadership studies, the concept of "leadership" includes both managers and employees, as well as the situation that they find themselves in (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2006). Given this, as stated in several studies, it is important to study how servant leadership is practiced and experienced in organizations (de Waal & Sivro, 2012; Hunter et al., 2013;

Parris & Peachey, 2013; Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011; Van Dierendonck, 2011), and in particular, it is important to explore people's experience of servant leadership in the business sector, within organizations in which servant leadership has been practiced for an extended period of time. Therefore, this study fulfills a particular research need as it is about a servant leadership organization in the business sector where servant leadership has been formally practiced for three decades, and it includes both employees and managers. In addition, this study is important as many organizations claim to practice servant leadership to achieve their visions and goals (Glashagel, 2009), and practitioners and scholars have increasingly gained more interest in understanding servant leadership because of its special approach of leading through serving and by focusing on helping followers reach organizational goals (Carter & Baghurst, 2014). Therefore, it is

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important to gain insight into how people experience the practice of servant leadership.

The organization in this study is open about its servant leadership culture, and some of its people have contributed to the knowledge and practice of servant leadership by delivering lectures at various conferences and for many other organizations. It is stated on the company's website that it has an executive team consisting of six individuals, it is in the business-to-business market and provides various technical services to the construction industry with surveying as one of their core businesses. The organization is located in the United States, and most of its people work at the organization's headquarters, though there are a total of six offices in six different locations. Following the recession in 2008, the organization faced new challenges due to decreasing demand for their services, which resulted in a different corporate strategy, new business ventures, the sale of a large part of their facilities, and a reduction in staff from 350 to 120 people.

This study seeks to obtain an understanding of how people experience the practice of servant leadership in a servant leadership organization in the United States:

> Research Question: How do people in a servant leadership organization experience the practice of servant leadership in their workplace?

Servant Leadership

In servant leadership, leading others is about providing leadership and service to followers simultaneously (Buchen, 1998; Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Greenleaf, 2008; Kahl, 2004) and helping them to accomplish their tasks, visions, and goals (Dingman & Stone, 2007), where serving means to offer time, compassion, and care to people (Russell & Stone, 2002) and leading means to provide clear vision and purpose where foresight is central to the leadership provided (Greenleaf, 2008). Moreover, in servant leadership, the focus is on others and their growth (Hale & Fields, 2007; Liden, Panaccio, Zaho Hu, & Meuser, 2014) and also the ability to motivate people to become servant leaders (Reed, Vidaver-Cohen, & Colwell, 2011). Leaders derive satisfaction from helping people grow (Barnabas & Sundararajan, 2012), while at the same time growing themselves (Greenleaf, 2002).

According to Greenleaf (2008), there is no single guideline available to point out what it is that makes one a servant leader, but the focus in servant leadership is on a fair-minded community, good citizenship, and using persuasion, and this is in line with his key words: "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (Greenleaf, 2008, p. 15). To evaluate whether servant leadership is useful, he proposes the following:

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

One thing that makes servant leadership different from other leadership approaches is the combination of "serving" and 'leading'; this challenging paradox is central to the idea (Greenleaf, 2008). Despite the importance of the "lead" dimension in servant leadership, it has not been highlighted in many publications. However, the focus on both "serve" and "lead" is central in Van Dierendonck's (2011) "Conceptual Model of Servant Leadership" and in Gunnarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir's (2013) model where "foresight" corresponds to the "lead" dimension of servant leadership, whereas "intrinsic interest in others" and "inner strength" are placed in the "serve" dimension of servant leadership. Furthermore, in Laub's (1999) model, a key variable of servant leadership is to provide leadership that includes foreseeing the future, taking initiative, and establishing goals (Parris & Peachey, 2013). In their study, Sousa and Van Dierendonck (2015) concluded that the "lead" dimension cannot be disconnected from the "serve" dimension, where "humility" corresponds to the "serve" dimension, whereas "action" corresponds to the "lead" dimension captured in empowerment, accountability, and stewardship.

Two of the models on servant leadership that can help us to understand the essence of servant leadership were published by Gunnarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir (2013) and by Van Dierendonck (2011). These models are different than other servant leadership models as they include a focus both on the "lead" and the "serve" dimensions. After reviewing writings from Greenleaf (2002, 2008), Gunnarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir (2013) presented the "three main characteristics of servant leadership," which are intrinsic interest in others, inner strength, and foresight. *Intrinsic interest in others* is one of the pillars of servant leadership. The clearest signal of this is the willingness to listen to others so that servant leaders understand better what is going on and understand better people's needs and their ideas. *Inner strength* is the second characteristic and is about recognizing strengths, weaknesses, goals, ideals, and the effect of one's words and actions. The third and final main characteristic of servant leadership is *foresight*, where the purpose of the leader is to have an overview of the situation, to encourage communication about the purpose of jobs, and to look to the future. In summary, *intrinsic interest in others* and *inner strength* are placed in the "serve" dimension of servant leadership, and *foresight* is placed in the "lead" dimension of servant leadership.

The second model presented here that includes a focus on both the "lead" and the "serve" dimensions of servant leadership is Dirk Van Dierendonck's (2011) "Conceptual Model of Servant Leadership." The model builds on former

conceptual models of servant leadership (Laub, 1999; Russell & Stone, 2002; Spears, 1995) as well as the empirical evidence of measures of servant leadership. The model includes six servant leadership characteristics, which are (a) empowering and developing people, (b) humility, (c) authenticity, (d) interpersonal acceptance, (e) providing direction, and (f) stewardship. The core of this model is the emphasis on the need and the motivation to both serve and lead. This means that a leader cannot be a servant leader by only serving or only leading as the leader has to do both.

Foresight, Decision Making, and Accountability in Servant Leadership

In servant leadership, it is important to make decisions that aim for the success of all stakeholders (Greenleaf, 2008), so servant leadership includes a focus on the prosperity of people as well as the organizations they work for (Liden, Wayne, Zaho, & Henderson, 2008; Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Oke, 2010). According to Greenleaf (2008), foresight, or to foresee things, refers to the "lead" the leader needs, and it is an ethical failure not to use it to foresee later events and take the appropriate actions (Greenleaf, 2008). Furthermore, leaders use their intuition to see into the future, based on their judgments on past and present events, and this results in a better than average guess about what is going to happen in the future (Greenleaf, 2008). This allows leaders to "foresee the outcome of a decision" (Crippen & Wallin, 2008, p. 556) and helps to avoid repeating mistakes and to predict the outcome for future decisions (Brewer, 2010). Spears (1998) lists foresight as one of ten characteristics of servant leadership and states that it is the ability to learn from past mistakes and grow from failures (Spears, 2004). To practice servant leadership requires one to be accountable toward the overall goals and mission of the organizations, so leaders are accountable for failures that could have been prevented by reasonable foresight (Greenleaf, 2008). Accountability can be seen as an underlying key factor in Greenleaf's writings and is closely linked to foresight and thus the lead that leaders have, as they underline the importance of the responsibility of serving the interests of people, the organization, and the society as a whole (Greenleaf, 2008). Accountability can be found in a few studies on servant leadership, and, for example, Gunnarsdóttir (2014) states that to be accountable is an important part of servant leadership and relates this to the acceptance of high standards at work, whereas Coetzer, Bussin, and Geldenhuys (2017) consider that accountability, for example, means holding others responsible and setting clear expectations. Sousa and Van Dierendonck (2015) state that accountability is important for both performance management and learning as accountability helps the leader to provide direction, but the key point is that accountability "makes sure that people feel responsible for their results" (Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2015, p. 15). Furthermore, Liden

et al. (2014) refer to accountability as identification to the organization or the unit, "proposing that a serving culture that is based on prioritizing the needs of others above one's own needs enhances followers' identification with the unit" (p. 1436). In the "Situational approach" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988), the leader is responsible for and has to choose the appropriate leadership style according to the needs of the followers. In addition, servant leaders thrive on the opportunity to share ideas because the process of sharing creates accountability for the results that are generated from their actions (Carter & Baghurst, 2014).

The Practice of Servant Leadership

In our review of the literature, it seems that only two studies, both conducted within the business sector, have focused on the practice of servant leadership within servant leadership organizations (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011). In addition, it appears that no research has been conducted that includes both managers and employees, though in the field of leadership studies the concept of leadership includes both managers and employees as well as the situations that they find themselves in Hughes et al. (2006). The study by Carter and Baghurst (2014) examines an organization that openly practices servant leadership with the purpose "to qualitatively explore servant leadership from the perspective of employees" with a special focus on employee engagement (Carter & Baghurst, 2014, p. 453). The main findings revealed that servant leadership influences employees in a positive way; it contributes to their commitment and loyalty in the workplace; participants built healthy work relationships and were active in achieving organizational goals; and employees were more engaged and felt responsible for delivering good service to customers as well as contributing to the company (Carter & Baghurst, 2014).

Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011) studied some organizations that publicly use servant leadership, with the purpose of revealing the perceived organizational barriers that prevent servant leadership practices and explore how business leaders link their servant leadership practices to their organization's effectiveness. Their findings revealed that the perceived organizational barriers that prevent the practice of servant leadership are the organization's culture, the fear of change, and the lack of knowledge regarding servant leadership. The ultimate test of a leader's effectiveness is based upon how a leader is allowed to demonstrate his or her traits and character, and the study revealed that leaders who practice servant leadership still experience difficulty in convincing others of the viability and effectiveness of servant leadership. The study shows that it is a challenge to practice servant leadership as servant leaders need to be able to operate for the whole company to ensure collaboration so that they can help to achieve organizational goals.

The study of Carter and Baghurst (2014) included mainly employees and only a few managers. Conversely, the study of Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011) included only managers and was not restricted to servant leadership organizations. Servant leadership includes a focus on both leaders and followers (Greenleaf, 2008) and thus to include both groups and their situation in a study will enhance the chances of gaining a deeper understanding of the practice of servant leadership.

Our study focuses on understanding how servant leadership is practiced in a servant leadership organization by including the experience of both managers and employees as leadership is recognized by scholars as including both (Heller & Van Til, 1983; Hollander, 1992; Jago, 1982), and in servant leadership, every single staff member is considered to be equally important (Greenleaf, 2008).

This study seeks to explore people's lived experience of servant leadership practices within a servant leadership organization:

Research Question: How do people in a servant leadership organization experience the practice of servant leadership in their workplace?

Method

The purpose of the methodology of phenomenology is to allow for an increased understanding and exploration of lived experiences of people in particular situations, as well as revealing the meaning of those situations. Therefore, a phenomenological approach was considered the most appropriate approach to data collection and analysis as the research question focuses on the lived experiences of people in a specific situation. Phenomenology is a suitable research methodology as it allows researchers to study the experience of being human in every possible way in the world we live in, as well as providing a rich source of ideas regarding how to examine and comprehend it (J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). According to Van Manen (1990), "Phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10).

In total, 10 people were interviewed, six women and four men, but according to Creswell (2013), five interviews are sufficient when conducting a phenomenology study. Interviewees ranged in age from 33 to 55 years, five of them held a management position and five held a nonmanagement position. All participants had a university degree or specialized licenses and had worked for the organization from just below 2 years to 19 years. The in-depth interviews were semistructured, with open-ended questions, and lasted 1 h on average. They were held in closed rooms at the organization's headquarters, except for two which were conducted via Skype and FaceTime. Interviewees were asked about their work life, how they experienced interactions with

fellow workers and how they were encouraged on the job, as well as how they communicated if they wanted to make some changes on the job. They were also asked about how they managed challenges and how mistakes are handled. They were then asked about personal development in their workplace and how people are encouraged to acquire new skills or knowledge on the job, as well as about the meaning and the significance of their personal development. Moreover, interviewees were asked about how important decisions are made and how goals are set in their workplace. Finally, all interviewees were asked about what servant leadership meant to them and how they think it is practiced in their workplace.

Interviewees seemed to express themselves freely and at a comfortable pace. After the interviews, notes were taken and thoughts were recorded on a digital recorder, including observations. This was done to document as much as possible the experiences of the interviewees and to ensure accountability to our perceptual lenses. Names of all interviewees were changed into pseudonyms.

The interviews were digitally recorded and were transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted according to the phenomenological procedure of description, reduction, and interpretation (Lanigan, 1988). In the *description* phase, the transcript from each interview was synthesized into a cohesive narrative from the perspective of each interviewee. The integrity of the description is based on the suspension of presuppositions about the phenomenon, that is, experience and the awareness of biases and subjectivity by bracketing presuppositions about the phenomenon that might confuse the neutral judgment of the lived experience (Kristjánsdóttir & DeTurk, 2013; Lanigan, 1988). This is referred to as invoking the *Epoché* (identifying the noema), where "Epoché requires that looking precedes judgment and that judgment of what is 'real' or 'most real' be suspended until all the evidence (or at least sufficient evidence) is in" (Ihde, 1986, p. 36). The second phase is the phenomenological *reduction*, where it is determined which part of the description is most important; this includes examining the narratives for essential themes. In this stage, it is crucial to challenge initial observations and rearrange them in terms of how one experiences the data (Lanigan, 1988). The third and final phase is *interpretation*. The purpose of the interpretation is to thematize meanings that were ambiguous or not apparent in previous steps. This includes, once again, reducing the initial themes to identify the most important feature of the phenomenon and relate the themes to one another as well to the research questions (Lanigan, 1988).

In addition to conducting interviews, an observation of a *critical incident* was included as a data collection method. This was in the form of a work meeting, consisting of both employees and managers, and was composed of five men and one woman. The purpose of this observation was to further explore the practice and the lived experience of people in the organization, and the same research question was used as for the interviews. One of the advantages of the *critical*

incident method is that it can help the researcher focus on specific issues and situations (Chell & Pittaway, 1998). As stated by Flanagan (1954), studying critical incidents can help to gather important facts in defined situations. One simply observes and tries to interfere as little as possible, and the observation is about paying attention and observing what happens (Ray, 2006). The objective was to observe all interactions in the meeting and try to interfere as little as possible. Participants had work experience from about 2 years to 19 years. The meeting was held at the organization's headquarters, lasted for about 70 min, and all participants seemed to express themselves freely.

The agenda of the meeting was to discuss the best ways to organize and handle *paid time off* (PTO) and to explore possible changes that needed to be made. Just as with the interviews, notes were taken both during and after the meeting and documented in a special journal. The meeting was also recorded for further study and note-taking. To document as much as possible, observations were in the form of written notes and delivered verbally to a digital recorder and included thoughts and feelings about the practice and the experience of the people in the meeting. Again, like in the interviews, this is done to ensure accountability to our perceptual lenses. As with the interviews, the method of phenomenology was used to interpret the documented observation of the meeting. Names of all people who participated in the meeting were changed into pseudonyms.

Results

The study reveals that people experience a focus both on individual and organizational goals at work, and they are determined to accept responsibility even if it means making difficult decisions, and people care and support each other and work together as a team. Two main themes emerged in the study that represented the organization's current practice of servant leadership: "Accountability as an integral part of the practice of servant leadership" and "people show care and help each other out at work." Three subthemes emerged within the first main theme: (a) the willingness to make tough decisions, (b) doing the right thing and decision making, and (c) slow work tempo when working on significant issues. Two subthemes emerged within the second main theme: (a) openness and autonomy and (b) to learn and develop.

Accountability as an Integral Part of the Practice of Servant Leadership

Many of the participants experience "accountability as an integral part of the practice of servant leadership," and they feel reliable for the prosperity of the organization. It is evident that interviewees experience and expect to live up to high standards at work, where ambition and the drive to achieve goals is important for the success of both individuals and the organization. Rachel's words are in line with this: "Uh, yeah, that's part of my job, is to . . . how do we produce this faster, better, more accurate." The high standards that are in place do not affect the interviewees in negative ways. However, Ellen describes these high standards and reveals pressure in her words: ". . . our mission statement talks about excellence and I often say that our mission statement should say perfection because we demand perfection . . ." It may impose significant pressure to achieve perfection, so more people within the organization might experience the same as Ellen. Still, other interviewees do not seem to experience pressure or negative feelings because of this.

Belinda states that "accountability" is one of the key elements of servant leadership, and the lack of it, both in relations to oneself and the organization, is not accepted in the workplace, and she explains by referring to one of the key persons in the company: "It's really about accountability and . . . he doesn't have tolerance for people that . . . aren't accountable . . . and servant leadership is really all about accountability, it's about personal accountability, it's about accountability to the organization." Robert also expresses the importance of accountability while discussing what servant leadership means to him as he underlines that accountability is part of servant leadership:

> Servant leadership . . . it really is that balance of . . . empowering others and encourage them to grow and . . . to build and make decisions in a participatory manner . . . but still be accountable.

In addition, Rachel expresses that for her to change jobs within the company, she may be responsible to help her replacement to adjust: "I actually have to create a replacement for what I have been doing . . . it's my responsibility [to help the person that takes over her job]."

The interviewees are ambitious people who want to be successful at work and feel that accepting responsibility is part of their job. In relation to this, several interviewees state that they have to accept a leadership role as they are expected to lead by example. As Nelson explains, "It means everyone in the organization is responsible. You truly lead by example . . . you have to be willing to stand up and say what's right, for you, for the organization." Rachel also reveals this, in relations to what servant leadership means to her, as she underlines that high expectations are part of the work culture: "Servant leadership to me is, I won't expect any more of anyone else than I can do myself . . . I set high expectations for myself so I expect people around me to work like I do." This means that people are expected to accept a leadership role at work, and they are responsible for focusing on achieving both individual and organizational goals, not only in terms of better individual performance but also better financial results for the organization.

Many interviewees experience that goal setting is important in terms of reaching high standards and that this helps

people as everyone gets a chance to participate in setting their individual goals with their supervisor or their team. Nelson expresses this when describing an annual review that every employee has to have: "Um, but we do a review once every, once a year . . . and it's kind of, 'did you meet your goals?'." The goal-setting process may help people to accept responsibility as well as motivate them, and because everyone within the organization participates in this type of goal setting, people feel that they are not only responsible for the success of themselves but also for the prosperity of the organization.

People in the work meeting also revealed their experience of "accountability" as they explored the possible effects of a new PTO on the people, the customers, and the organization itself. For instance, Ellen explained that her former employer mainly focused on short-term gains in its PTO. She felt that was the wrong approach as the PTO system needed to ensure long-term success for the organization and should not be driven by short-term financial goals. It was clear in the meeting that the financial side of the system, including the cost of the system for the organization, was an important issue. As Roger stated, "It was a liability to the organization" when referring to "the vacation unused" by employees that the organization had to pay out. Participants in the meeting showed responsibility by agreeing that the new PTO should not work like that.

Ellen described an increased focus on being responsible for business results after the recession as people had to respond to new circumstances: "Uh, we have a lot of meetings in this company, I think it's because . . . [people] went through a deep recession and survived their recession and . . . [are] trying to understand how to thrive post-recession." Belinda also stated that the recession led to new challenges as the company had to fight harder to survive. She related it to the sport of soccer as she described it as the need to focus more than before on the defensive part of the game: "We've been playing more defense than offense." All this shows that people accepted this responsibility by working through it together as a team while trying to understand better the challenges facing the organization and to explore what was feasible for the company in terms of business strategy and opportunities.

The Willingness to Make Tough Decisions

Making difficult decisions became a key issue within the practice of "accountability" following the recession in 2008. Costs were cut and new revenues created as the organization shifted its focus more to business results, and that led to the willingness to make tough decisions. This is underlined in Aron's words as he describes the necessity for the owners of the organization to focus on business results so that the organization can stay in business, and the willingness to make difficult decisions even if people do not like it:

> There are things that you have to do in business . . . it might not be taken well . . . by the employees but they have to push forward with it. It's the best for the company and they need to push forward.

So people think that it is normal practice, if necessary, to make difficult decisions as it is part of business to make changes. This seems to be accepted by people within the organization, even if they practice servant leadership, as described by Belinda: "You know because people would say, oh well we can't ever fire anyone because that's not being a servant leader." Belinda's words about letting people go imply that people in the organization had previously felt that it was not in the spirit of servant leadership to lay off people. However, according to interviewees this seems no longer to be the prevailing attitude as no interviewee mentioned that this practice should not be part of servant leadership. Nelson's words echo the same and also reveal that decisions that might be perceived to be "tough" or unpopular are accepted as part of servant leadership: "But I think you . . . as a leader and as a servant leader you truly have to make those tough decisions or be willing to make those tough decisions as well." This means that people within the organization do not associate servant leadership with a soft management approach as they may have done in the past, according to both Belinda's and Nelson's experiences.

Doing the Right Thing and Decision Making

Doing the right thing as part of "accountability" is integrated with decision making. People experience that doing the right thing is nonnegotiable and seem to be proud that the organization emphasizes and supports good behavior. Rebecca sums this up when revealing that she considers doing the right thing when making decisions: "I think when I'm making a decision that I try to think what is best for the company and how it involves other people." So doing the right thing means not only to serve people but also the organization. Interviewees describe that when decisions are made, they evaluate them in relation to ethics, and they are compared with moral standards. Furthermore, people focus on foresight as they think about the consequences of their actions. Aron emphasizes that unethical actions are not accepted in the organization and if something comes up in this area, people discuss it:

> If I got any information that's unethical . . . I won't move forward . . . I've seen that in . . . you know my direct manager's decision-making . . . that's a very clear example for me . . . we discuss it as a development team.

Aron's words reveal that doing the right thing, in relation to ethical behavior, is valued in the workplace. It is for the betterment of the whole organization, not only for the interests of individuals, although in the end it will serve all, including

the clients. Therefore, doing the right thing seems to be integrated into the culture of the organization, and people believe that it serves the organization in the long run.

Slow Work Tempo When Working on Significant Issues

Several interviewees reveal that they experience the work tempo at the organization as slow. Nelson underlines this when discussing his career within the organization: "I wanted my career, and I wanted to move faster . . . Teflon [pseudo name of organization] doesn't move fast." On many occasions, people bring up in the interviews that it depends on the type of decision or size of problem how much time, effort, and involvement is invested. For example, if it is a minor issue or a small problem that needs to be resolved, one or few employees can solve it quickly. However, if it is a significant issue or a big problem that requires an important decision to be made that can affect the whole organization, the decision-making process is longer and more complicated. Aron's insight into the practice of how important decisions are made reveals that numerous individuals and teams are involved when this is done. He states that there is a process whereby an important decision travels from employees through the corporate ladder and all the way to the board and then back, and may even include outside consultants. Then, according to Aron, the impact of the decision is weighed: "How's it gonna affect the company? How's it gonna affect business? How's it gonna affect employees?" Belinda also describes a lengthy and a collaborative decision-making process when speaking about a layoff of one of their the middle managers:

> We involved all of our leaders, so they were all involved in the decision to terminate . . . [the employee] we actually . . . did go and approach some people that where his subordinates. In that decision alone, you probably had eight to nine people involved . . . to decide whether or not we wanted to terminate . . . so, it was very collaborative.

Still, there seem to be instances of a faster process if this is required by the situation, and then a quick decision will be made, as in Aron's words: "Least amount of impact, you know, bad impact that would happen . . . but then they also understand there are times when it just has to happen." Aron's words indicate that this slow process does not seem to frustrate most people as many decisions can be made quickly and people seem to understand and agree that more important decisions require more time. Many interviewees seem to feel that this is the best way to address and solve problems at work. It may enable them to share responsibility and ensure that they get a chance to participate and may also give them confidence to succeed on the job. However, one interviewee expressed a different view when criticizing the amount of time spent on decision making and thinks it is not in the best interest of the organization as she revealed frustration and perhaps suggested

a lack of trust toward people: ". . . we got to a point where, where we should have made the decision . . . and yet, we continue to analyze it and over analyze."

The experience of the interviewees of the practice of "accountability" shows that servant leadership includes not only a soft part but also a tougher part, which they consider important for their organization to thrive. Understanding and accepting the practice of servant leadership in this way helps them to comply with a high level of responsibility on the job and maybe to cope with the pressure that may come with demanding goals.

People Show Care and Help Each Other Out at Work

Many interviewees claim that to be effective at work, they have to work together, which means helping each other to achieve both individual and organizational goals. This is evident in many responses, for instance, when Billy explains how people work together as a team, which delivers success for the individuals as well as the organization, meaning people feel good about their jobs while the organization delivers profits. His words also show that people care about each other, and they feel good about working together: "We very much have to work together and cover each other because if, um, they're successful, then I'm successful and the company [is] successful, it's doing what we have to do together." These words show that there seems to be a unity in the workplace and people are willing to help each other. It seems that people believe in each other's abilities, and they care about each other, and therefore they do not only think about themselves at work. Ellen expresses this in her words, as she underlines that regardless of whether one is a manager or an employee, everyone can participate in teamwork:

> I feel like we are a team . . . you know, it's trying to keep things collaborative so that everybody feels like this is a team versus, you know . . . this is a structure, environment where you have to do what I say 'cos I am above you in the chart.

Ellen's words reveal that it pleases people that rank does not seem to matter within the organization as everyone is willing to participate in teamwork on an equal basis, and it gives people the feeling that they are working together and that everyone's contribution at work matters. Also, this seems to give people the feeling that they will get the necessary support to do their jobs. Rachel underlines the same when speaking about what servant leadership means to her as she talks about unity in the workplace, but she also describes determination as people help each other to achieve mutual goals:

> If they need help . . . I'll do anything . . . I'll stay late at night with them . . . we're all trying to achieve one goal and if we all can do whatever is required then we're gonna reach that goal together.

In relation to support and trust at work, many interviewees claim that delegation is important. Robert expresses this as he describes a culture where people trust each other as they are allowed to make decisions at work. His words also underline that it is part of delegation to help and guide people: "We wanna ask questions, we wanna probe and guide but for the most part we wanna let them make those decisions [referring to employees]."

The practice of "people show care and help each other out at work" was also evident in the work meeting as participants agreed that the new PTO should not affect people within the organization in any negative way but rather it needed to have a positive impact. In this light, Robert brought attention to articles that revealed that ineffective PTO's had terrible effects on employees, and then Roger referred to a research study where there was an effective PTO, like one they wanted to have: "And the people who took time off [in the organization where the effective PTO was in place] were able to have a good life, work-life balance . . ." Another example of showing care and aiming for the welfare of the employees when discussing the new PTO was when Roger refers to an academic research study related to employee health, where an employee was overworked and fell asleep during lunch hour. Then, he stated that this was "not healthy, no work balance with his wife and kids," and further, he stated that he thought that their organization had an obligation of not running things like that ". . . an obligation . . . I feel that we should have," he stated. Therefore, it was evident in the meeting that participants felt that people's needs are important. In other words, as underlined by Roger, people need to be healthy at work and not overworked and also to be able to spend time with their families.

Openness and Autonomy

Openness and autonomy are part of the practice of "people show care and help each other out at work." People experience that both elements are important in relations to working together as a team as people are not afraid to voice their opinions as well as seek advice from others at work. An example of this may be the "open door policy" that many interviewees spoke about. Rachel describes this in her words about her direct supervisor: "I can go to him and, you know, 'here it is, this is what I need.' And, he'll respond and yeah, I have no calms about talking to him and all that." This shows that people rely on each other at work and, for example, depend on each other's different views and expert opinions. Nelson talks about the open-door policy and how autonomy relates to openness as he is granted autonomy as long as he is open about his work to his supervisor:

> He let's me work autonomously . . . as long as I am open with him and share . . . the different, like the metrics . . . with clients and things like that . . . open door policy which makes it very easy so if I do have a question . . . I can go in and ask.

People seem to aim to be open to others, and it does not matter who it is, as evidenced in Billy's words: "I try to be as open and transparent as much as possible [at work] . . . I feel comfortable enough to have open conversations with . . . whether it is the leadership team or staff members." Allen sums up the practice of openness and autonomy when discussing the relationship with his supervisor as he underlines that he is allowed and trusted to do his work but he keeps him up to date, and they have a transparent working relationship:

> My boss is very hands off, he trusts me . . . he lets me do what I need to do and he does not micromanage me . . . but I check in with him . . . and tell him what my schedule is and everything, and what I need to do for the week . . . it's unique relationship.

To Learn and Develop

To learn and develop is rooted in the culture of the organization, and Robert underlines the importance of it when referring to necessary skills that people need to have:

> This is important to us and you have to go and learn because if you don't have those skills sets internally you're gonna have to go out to the market and find that. So we try to take that same message to our employees as we continue to evolve and grow.

Maria also expresses that learning and developing is rooted in the organizational culture when discussing the meaning of servant leadership and how it is practiced in their workplace as she underlines that taking care of each other's needs and supporting each other to learn and develop is important for people: "Acknowledging and . . . making sure that the needs of others are being taken care of and doing what you can to support others." Regarding support, in relations to learning and developing, most interviewees mention that there is a mentor system in place. They feel that this helps them to do a better job and to feel better at work as it gives them confidence to achieve work-related goals. Rachel sums this up: "As I learn more there, and I take on different roles, I'm also gonna have teach the next guy coming up behind me how to do what I do." Ellen revealed a negative experience when it comes to making significant mistakes on the job or not learning from mistakes. She stated that it would not be tolerated and as a result people could get excluded from others at work: "In this organization, people who make mistakes often are alienated." Still, other interviewees described the process of making mistakes in the workplace as being fair as people are expected to make mistakes, and they are seen as a learning opportunity, so people get the opportunity to learn and avoid making mistakes.

Interviewees experience that there is less investment in learning and development today than before the recession. Billy describes this experience:

We used to have policies in place . . . assisting employees and development and training . . . then we went through a bad economy then a lot of things were kinda cut out due to kind of, necessity.

So people may have suffered in terms of support on the job because of lack of training, and it may have limited their resources to succeed at work. Belinda underlines this and states that changes are coming, emphasizing that it is important to provide proper education and training: "I think professional training is extremely important," and when referring to special training for new employees and special training on servant leadership she adds, "So those are the things that I want to focus on again." Ellen also states the same while expressing displeasure regarding the lack of training that can be related to the recession. She also underlines the importance of people having the opportunity to learn and develop:

We haven't had the focus on that, [learning and development] quite frankly we haven't been able to . . . everybody needs training . . . I have to guess that it was one of the easiest things for the company to cut when things got tough . . . and I just don't think we've ever started spending more on training. I want the other people on my staff to grow and develop.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how people working for a servant leadership organization experience the practice of servant leadership in their workplace. Results shed light on how people experience the practice of leading by serving and show the importance of both "serve" and "lead" as two foundational dimensions of servant leadership as revealed in people's experience regarding the importance of being accountable and working together as a team while showing care for each other. The lived experience of the practice of servant leadership through shared foresight and accountability sheds light on the "lead" dimension of servant leadership and contributes to a better understanding of servant leaders needing to use both the "serve" and "lead" dimensions of servant leadership, as stated by Van Dierendonck (2011) and Gunnarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir (2013).

Results of the study show how servant leaders may have to make difficult and unpopular decisions, and slow tempo may be necessary to resolve significant issues. Participants experienced that tough decisions, such as layoffs and re-organizing of the business, became a necessity after the recession; this was perceived as important for both staff and business outcomes in the long run. Because of this, people are willing to work together for their personal benefit as well as for the prosperity of the company. This supports findings from previous studies about servant leadership and shows that servant leadership is concerned with the success of all organizational stakeholders (Liden et al., 2008; Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008; Walumbwa et al., 2010), even if it means making difficult decisions.

The results show how people experience servant leadership through the practice of "accountability" while accepting responsibility and demanding job requirements. Furthermore, the results give insights into how participants experience a collaborative culture, with a focus on the welfare of people as well as on business results. Practicing "accountability" is an important part of servant leadership, and unpopular decisions may be necessary. Accountability has probably always been practiced within the study organization but became a key practice after the recession as revenues fell and demand for many of the organization's services decreased in a significant way. People seem to believe that this practice will allow the organization to prosper. Their acceptance and support shows that they agree that servant leadership includes not only a soft part but also a more challenging part. This may help people to accept a high level of responsibility on the job, and perhaps live with the increased pressure that comes with challenges, demands, and responsibility. These results are in line with Greenleaf's (2008) writings about the importance of responsibility by serving the interests of the whole and that servant leadership is not about serving personal interests but the greater good of the group, organizations, and society at large. This is also in line with Gunnarsdóttir's (2014) findings that in servant leadership, staff is kept accountable for their work and performances and, further, can be related to Sousa and Van Dierendonck (2015) who state that "accountability" is part of the "lead" part of servant leadership. In relations to this, the concept of *foresight* is placed in the "lead" dimension of servant leadership as underlined by Greenleaf (2008) and Gunnarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir (2013) in their model of "three main characteristics of servant leadership" where foresight is one of the main characters.

In this study, the practice of servant leadership is experienced by valuing collaboration and shared foresight while accepting accountability and challenging goals to keep up with high standards at work. Learning and continuous development is important, and delegation is practiced as well as effective communication, an open-door policy and a mentor system to facilitate success at work; together, these create a special community. This can be considered as the serving part of servant leadership and is in line with Greenleaf's work (2008) when he explained how the servant leader operates for the good of individuals, the group, and the community. It is also in line with previous findings about how servant leaders provide for the community (Dillon, 2001).

Participants are willing to go the extra mile to help each other at work while servicing the customers. This can also be considered as the serving part of servant leadership and can be related to a servant leader being self-sacrificing, humble, and willing to help followers do their work if needed (Greenleaf, 2008) and is in line with findings about how the servant leader attends to people's needs in the workplace (B. N. Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004). This is also in accordance with Hersey and Blanchard's

(1988) "situational approach" where leaders use the appropriate leadership style to assess their followers to meet their needs.

Another element that can be considered as the serving dimension of servant leadership is mutual trust and that people respect each other's views. This can be also seen in previous studies that show how servant leadership is about serving others (Andersen, 2009; Kahl, 2004) and caring for people (Russell & Stone, 2002). People enjoy interacting and working together and show determination toward achieving common goals as they seem to be "in the same boat." This can be related to servant leadership, including a willingness to help to accomplish tasks, visions, or goals (Dingman & Stone, 2007).

In summary, people's experience demonstrated collaboration, founded on shared foresight and accountability toward coworkers, the organization itself and the customers, which is in line with findings from Walumbwa et al. (2010) who showed that "servant leadership is uniquely concerned with the success of all organizational stakeholders" (Walumbwa et al., 2010, p. 518). Furthermore, the practice of servant leadership is experienced through mutual service as enjoying interaction, supporting each other, determination toward achieving mutual goals and being "in the same boat." This shows that participants experience both the leading and the serving dimension of servant leadership as balanced in daily practices as well as in personal and organizational values, which is in line with Sousa and Van Dierendonck (2015), Liden et al. (2014), and Carter and Baghurst (2014), who reveal the duality of servant leadership and the importance of being accountable when practicing servant leadership.

We believe our study offers valuable insights and understanding of the real experience of the practice of servant leadership within a servant leadership organization as presented in two main themes and the subthemes of the study. Therefore, our study extends former research when it comes to how people experience the practice of servant leadership, in an organization that has decided to formally implement and practice servant leadership. The most significant factor revealed in this study is that participants express clearly how they experience both the "serve" and the "lead" dimension of servant leadership as being important for the organization, with the "lead" dimension being even more practiced than the "serve" dimension. This is important as much of the current trend in relation to servant leadership is toward labeling it as soft and focused primarily on the "serve" dimension. Along with subthemes, the practice of "accountability as an integral part of the practice of servant leadership" would be placed in the "lead" dimension of these models while the practice of "people show care and help each other out at work" would be placed in the "serve" dimension, when compared with the "Conceptual Model of Servant Leadership" (Van Dierendonck, 2011) and the model of "Three Main Characteristics of Servant Leadership" (Gunnarsdóttir &

Jónsdóttir, 2013). Therefore, in terms of practicing servant leadership, participants accept that servant leadership consists of both "serving," which is the soft dimension, and "leading," which is considered the harder dimension. This means that a key contribution of our study is a deep insight into how participants experience the practice of both the "serve" dimension and the "lead" dimension of servant leadership in a business organization that has formally practiced servant leadership for decades. This underlines that both dimensions are important for the existence of the organization, with the "lead" dimension being considered more important, as shown by the increased focus after the recession on "accountability as an integral part of the practice of servant leadership." In relation to this, people experience an increased focus on prosperity for the organization, which is evident in the willingness to make tough decisions, even if these can have negative consequences for employees, such as layoffs. There is also a willingness to invest significant time and to involve numerous people when it comes to making important decisions.

Conclusion

Participants in our study experience that they practice both the "serve" dimension and the "lead" dimension of servant leadership, with a little more focus on the "lead" dimension. During a period with new challenges, the balance between these two dimensions of servant leadership became even more important. Increased emphasis on business results and "accountability" was necessary and was accepted by people to meet individual as well as organizational goals, to foster both "serve" and "lead." This was possible through the practice of shared foresight, accountability, collaboration, and mutual support, with a focus on positive outcomes both for individuals and the organization.

This study is not without its limitations. It includes a servant leadership organization in the business sector that faced big challenges and made significant changes to be able to prosper again. Thus, a study of other servant leadership organizations facing different situations and challenges may reveal other experiences of key practices. Numerous social and economic factors, such as the type and size of the organization, cultural elements, different business environments, political landscape, and other issues, may present different situations and challenges for servant leaders. Therefore, we would like to see continued research in this area.

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