

How does servant leadership impact high school students with disabilities and families  
entering higher education?

EDE 9806: Ethnography and Case Study Design

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## Background Information

The discussion of this paper will be based from ethnographic observations. The setting is Bellmore-Merrick JFK High School, located in Merrick, New York. This event was called “college planning for the classified high school student”. The purpose was to educate parents and their children with disabilities, who are contemplating entering into higher education. The parents were educated by panel speakers, who were representatives, from different colleges with special education support programs. This researcher examined and documented the interactions between support service higher education administrators and prospective students.

Researchers speculate why poor servant leadership has a negative influence on participants. Good servant leadership has a positive influence on participants in many ways. The participants observe positive influence in a beneficial way. Their behavior responds positively towards people out there willing to help. These individuals are willing to put others ahead of their own needs. The need to serve is the core of the servant leadership model. A servant leader is committed to the growth of the individual and organization.

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to answer the question: *How does servant leadership impact high school students with disabilities and families entering higher education?*

## Statement of the Problem

*What is the impact of servant leadership on high school students with disabilities and families entering higher education?*

## Methodology Research Design

The framework for this study is based on a mixed method design. Prior to conducting this mixed method study, an initial ethnographic observation and data collection within a high school located in Long Island, New York. This was done in order to identify reoccurring themes. Upon analysis of data, *behavior* and *servant leadership* were identified as themes. For this study, the population sample was taken from family/support systems of high school students with disabilities located in New York. This study will be conducted for thirty days. The qualitative research component examines the impact of servant leadership and students' family/support systems with disabilities behaviors during special education college nights. Qualitative data will be collected through field work observations. The quantitative component examines possible correlation between strong servant leadership and positive behavior. Quantitative data will be collected throughout a survey.

## Literature Review

Robert Greenleaf (1970) introduced the term “servant leadership.” According to Greenleaf (1970), the servant leader is servant first. The natural feeling that one wanted to help before helping themselves; followed by the conscious decision to be inspired to lead. The need to serve is the core of the servant leadership model. Leader first is focused on helping followers come more independent and less in need of the leader. Individuals wanted to be leaders and separate themselves from others. Greenleaf (1970) discussed the skills needed to be a servant leader; the importance of responsiveness, listening, and the differences between coercive, manipulative, and persuasive power. Greenleaf (1970) described some of the characteristics and activities of servant leaders,

gave examples that showed individual efforts, inspired by vision and a servant ethic, can make a significant change in the quality of society. True leaders were picked by their followers. In the future, there may be a better system than the one we had. Whatever the system may be, if the people to lead it are not there, a better system will not construct a better society. The servant leader will be cautious of pursuing an idealistic path notwithstanding of its impact on order (Greenleaf, 1970).

Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) recommended servant leadership needed future research to become a valuable leadership theory. In order to become a valuable leadership theory, the theory needs to describe why leaders do what they do, support predictions, and prescribe specific circumstances under which leaders perform best. Sendjaya and James Sarros (2002) conclude that the distinctive characteristics of servant leaders in their primary intent and self-concept. They have strong character by taking on the nature of a servant and the role of a servant. According to Greenleaf (1977), servant leaders are leaders who put other people's needs, and interest above their own. The servant leaders had made a choice to serve first and lead second.

Servant Leadership emphasizes the "golden rule". It allows the individuals' needs and wants to be taken into consideration. Individuals are treated with respect, and in turn they give respect (Hunter, 2012). The concept of servant leadership had been around for a few thousand years before gaining acceptance in American business circles started by Robert Greenleaf (1970). Research indicates that servant leadership styles are effective in various ways.

Larry Spears (2010) identified a set of ten critical characteristics of the servant leader. They included: 1. Listening – Servant leaders are cherished for their

communication and decision making skills. One must listen to what was said, as well as, what is not said. 2. Empathy – The servant leader tries to understand and empathize with others. Do not reject co-workers and colleagues as people, even if you refuse to accept certain actions or performance. 3. Healing – A servant leader has the capacity for healing one's self and one's relationship to other's. Servant leader's recognized that they have an opportunity to make other's feel whole again. 4. Awareness – The servant leader needs general awareness, and especially self-awareness, to become stronger leaders. 5. Persuasion – The servant leader seeks to influence others, rather than force compliance. 6. Conceptualization – Servant leaders seek beyond the day-to-day schedule. The servant leaders pursue to delicate balance between theoretical thinking and a day-to-day operational approach. 7. Foresight – A servant leader has the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation. Foresight is a characteristic that allows the servant leaders to comprehend the past, present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future. 8. Stewardship – A servant leader assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others. Also, accentuates the use of openness and encouragement, rather than control. 9. Commitment to the growth of people – A servant leader trusts that people have an essential value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. The servant leader will do everything in their power to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues. 10. Building community – A servant leader seeks to classify means for building community among those who work within a given institution. Servant leadership suggests that true community can be created among businesses and institutions. These characteristics serve to communicate the power and

promise that this concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge (Spears, 2010).

Robert Dennis and Mihai Bocarnea (2005) presented an instrument to measure the constructs of Patterson's servant leadership theory. They are: 1. Agapao love – The cornerstone of the servant leadership/follower relationship. Winston (2002) defined agapao as a means to love in a social or more sense. This love causes leaders to consider each person as complete and not as a means to an end. 2. Humanity – practicing self-acceptance and to be focused on others instead of yourself. Furthermore, viewing oneself as no better or worse than others do. 3. Altruism – helping others unselfishly just for the sake of helping, which entangles personal sacrifice, although there is no personal gain (Kaplan, 2000). Eisenberg (1986) defined altruism as “voluntary behavior that is intended to benefit another and is not motivated by the expectation of external reward”.

4. Vision – is the act or power of imagination; unusual discernment or foresight; or, mode of conceiving or seeing. A necessity of good leadership is vision. Servant leaders use their own personal vision to build their corporate vision. 5. Trust – Servant leaders model truth in the way they empower, persuade, and coach. Trust is an essential characteristic of the servant leader (Story, 2002). 6. Service – A mission of responsibility to others is a act of serving. Leaders understand that service is the center of servant leadership. Leaders must have a sense of responsibility, in order to, be of service to others.

7. Empowerment - is entrusting power to others, and for the servant leader it contains effective listening, putting an emphasis on teamwork, making people feel significant, and valuing of love and equality (Russell and Stone, 2002). Ciulla (1998) explained the difference between bogus empowerment and empowerment. The leader serves as a role

model for inspiring others and for valuing their differences. These seven component concepts were used to build items for a servant leadership instrument. The participants for the study consisted of a stratified sample taken from the study response database. Using an online survey, the surveys were created and administered using surveysuite. Three different data collections were used for the growth of this instrument reducing the 71-item scale to 42 items yielding five factors: vision, trust, love, humility, and empowerment. Dennis and Bocarnea (2005) recommended that future research included surveys at organizations and companies that encourage servant leadership concepts. Also, future research should contain how each gender influences some of these items. The end result is that this instrument has the ability to give or predict measurement to the concepts of Patterson's theory of servant leadership. Hence, a servant leader can measure his or her effectiveness as a servant leader (Dennis and Bocarnea, 2005).

Hunter (2012) explained he has met great leaders who were awful managers. Managers who were skilled at problem-solving or geniuses around balance sheets yet could not effectively lead two people to the bathroom if their lives depended upon it. If there is nobody following, you are not leading. Everyone is a leader because everyone impacts other people every day, for good or bad, which is why you do not have to be the boss to be a leader. For example, the most important leaders at Southwest Airlines were the flight attendants because they were influencing thousands of customers every day. These flight attendants were even considered more valuable than the higher administration. Through direct contact with patrons, flight attendants provided the social component to the transportation service. Higher administration rarely had direct contact

with patrons. Hunter (2012) defined being the servant as “simply the business of identifying and meeting the legitimate needs of the people entrusted to your care”. James Hunter (2012) defines his terms as first leadership then servant. According to Hunter (2012), management is what you do; leadership is the person you are and the encouragement and effect you have upon the people you came into contact with. Management is not identical with leadership.

#### Discussion/Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to answer the question: *How does servant leadership impact high school students with disabilities and families entering higher education?* Prior to conducting this mixed method study, an initial ethnographic observation and data collection was conducted within a high school located in Long Island, New York. This was done in order to identify reoccurring themes. Upon analysis of data, *behavior* and *servant leadership* were identified as themes.

Saundra Reinke (2004) implied that the servant leader is a steward who embraces the organization in trust to the public it helped, while remaining attuned to the needs and situations of those who work in the organization and dedicated to empowering others to succeed personally and professionally. Saundra Reinke (2004) proposed, “A servant leader is one who is committed to the growth of both the individual and the organization, and who works to build community within organizations”. Research shows, the impact of servant leadership successfully intrigues high school students with disabilities and families entering higher education to flourish individually and professionally. There is a correlation between strong servant leadership and positive behavior.



## Implications

The implications of this research could benefit high school students with disabilities and families entering into higher education. If we can teach new leaders effective and positive communication skills, then more students with disabilities will be more driven to attend these seminars and have enough courage to enter into higher education. Therefore, families will be more supportive and comfortable with their child moving onto higher education knowing that there is legitimate support available.

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