Research on Servant Leadership

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Contents of this section

The research articles and chapters in this section of the website are organized as follows:

A. Scholarly Literature Reviews— Theory and Definition of Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf launched the modern servant leadership movement with his essay, *The Servant as Leader*, first published in 1970. While Greenleaf inspired and provided guidance for practitioners, it was not his intention to provide an academic definition or theory of servant leadership. However, scholars need an academic definition or theory in order to conduct research on the impact of servant leadership in the workplace. Here are some articles by scholars who have surveyed the academic literature and developed definitions of servant leadership.

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Jill W. Graham, "Servant-Leadership in Organizations: Inspirational and Moral," *Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1991)

Abstract:

This paper offers a critical analysis of charismatic leadership (in several guises) because of its absence of moral safeguards. The heightened

motivation inspired by charismatic or transformational leadership may override followers' moral misgivings. Many previous writers on the subject have made only passing reference to this inherent danger by noting that charismatic leadership is value-neutral: Mohandas Gandhi, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jesus Christ, Adolph Hitler, Rev. Jim Jones, and Joseph Stalin are all frequently cited as charismatic leaders. This paper goes further by searching out a model of leadership that is both inspirational and moral. Three examples from workplace setting are described to illustrate the new model: servant leadership.

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Robert C. Liden, Sandy J. Wayne, Hao Zhao, David Henderson, "Servant Leadership: Development of a multidimensional measure and mult-level assessment," *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008)

Abstract:

Servant leadership stresses personal integrity and serving others, including employees, customers, and communities. This article focuses on a servant leadership measure that was created by identifying 9 dimensions. Relevant items were then developed and subjected to factor analysis with a sample of 298 students, resulting in a 7-factor solution. Using an organizational sample of 182 individuals, we verified this 7-factor model with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We further validated our 28-item servant leadership scale by regressing outcomes on the servant leadership dimensions, controlling for transformational leadership and leader-member exchange (LMX) in a multi-level hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) analysis. The results suggest that servant leadership is a multidimensional construct and at the individual level makes a unique contribution beyond transformational leadership and LMX in explaining community citizenship behaviors, in-role performance, and organizational commitment. No between-leader (group-level) differences were found in the outcomes variables.

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Dirk van Dierendonck, "Servant Leadership: A Review and Synthesis," *Journal of Management,* Vol. 37 No. 4 July 2011.

Abstract:

Servant leadership is positioned as a new field of research for leadership scholars. This review deals with the historical background of servant leadership, its key characteristics, the available measurement tools, and the results of relevant studies that have been conducted so far. An overall conceptual model of servant leadership is presented. It is argued that leaders who combine their motivation to lead with a need to serve display servant leadership. Personal characteristics and culture are positioned alongside the motivational dimension. Servant leadership is demonstrated by empowering and developing people; by expressing humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship; and by providing direction. A high-quality dyadic relationship, trust, and fairness are expected to be the most important mediating processes to encourage self-actualization, positive job attitudes, performance, and a stronger organizational focus on sustainability and corporate social responsibility.

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Nathan Eva, Mulyadi Robin, Sen Sendjaya, Dirk van Dierendonck, Robert C. Liden, "Servant Leadership: A systematic review and call for future research," *The Leadership Quarterly* 30 (2019)

Abstract:

Notwithstanding the proliferation of servant leadership studies with over 100 articles published in the last four years alone, a lack of coherence and clarity around the construct has impeded its theory development. We provide an integrative and comprehensive review of the 285 articles on servant leadership spanning 20 years (1998-2018), and in so doing extend the field in four different ways. First, we provide a conceptual clarity of servant leadership vis-à-vis other value-based leadership approaches and offer a new definition of servant leadership. Second, we evaluate 16 existing measures

of servant leadership in light of their respective rigor of scale construction and validation. Third, we map the theoretical and nomological network of servant leadership in relation to its antecedents, outcomes, moderators, mediators. We finally conclude by presenting a detailed future research agenda to bring the field forward encompassing both theoretical and empirical advancement. All in all, our review paints a holistic picture of where the literature has been and where it should go into the future.

To order a copy of the article from the publisher, click **here**.

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G. James Lemoine and Terry C. Blum, "Leadership and Servant Leadership: Understanding Both by Bridging the Past and Present," Chapter 1, *Inspiration for Servant-Leaders: Lessons from Fifty Years of Research and Practic*e (South Orange, New Jersey: The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2020).

To order a copy of the book, click **here**.

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Chad A. Hartnell, G. James Lemoine, Hamed Ghahremani, and Derek J. Stolter, "Servant leadership within organizational contexts: Identifying core beliefs underlying servant leadership and infusing servant leadership into organizations," Chapter 5, *Inspiration for Servant-Leaders: Lessons from Fifty Years of Research and Practic*e (South Orange, New Jersey: The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2020).

To order a copy of the book, click **here**.

B. **Scholarly Research on the Impact of Servant Leadership in the Workplace**

Research has shown that servant leadership is effective in the workplace. For example, servant leaders facilitate effective teamwork. Servant leadership may enhance both job performance and commitment to the organization. Servant-leaders may inspire followers to serve the community in which the organization is embedded. Research has revealed that employees of servant-leaders are more

helping and creative than those working with leaders who scored lower on servant leadership. Servant leadership has been shown to be positively related to employee job satisfaction. Research on for-profit organizations suggests that when servant leadership increases, profit increases.

1. *Highlights and references*

In 2017, Dr. Robert C. Liden and Meng Zhong of the University of Illinois at Chicago provided a review of the research literature in "Highlights of Scientific Research on Servant Leadership."

To download a copy of the "Highlights," click **here**.

Haoying Xu, Meng Zhong, and Robert C. Liden published a chapter on research in *Inspiration for Servant-Leaders: Lessons from Fifty Years of Research and Practice* (2020). Their chapter is titled "The State of the Art in Academic Servant Leadership Research: A Systematic Review."

To download a copy of the references that the authors used in that chapter, click **here**.

To order a copy of the book, click **here**.

2. *Research journal articles*

Here are some articles about the impact of servant leadership at the unit or team level and the impact on overall organization performance. There are also articles on the shareholder primacy issue, indicating that servant leadership is best for all stakeholders, including shareholders.

a. *Effectiveness at the unit or team level*

Jia Hu and Robert C. Liden, "Antecedents of Team Potency and Team Effectiveness: An Examination of Goal and Process Clarity and Servant Leadership," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2011.

Abstract:

Integrating theories of self-regulation with team and leadership literatures, this study investigated goal and process clarity and servant leadership as 3

antecedents of team potency and subsequent team effectiveness, operationalized as team performance and organizational citizenship behavior. Our sample of 304 employees represented 71 teams in 5 banks. Results showed that team-level goal and process clarity as well as team servant leadership served as 3 antecedents of team potency and subsequent team performance and team organizational citizenship behavior. Furthermore, we found that servant leadership moderated the relationships between both goal and process clarity and team potency, such that the positive relationships between both goal and process clarity and team potency were stronger in the presence of servant leadership.

To order a copy of the article from the publisher, click **here**.

Robert C. Liden, Sandy J. Wayne, Hao Zhao, David Henderson, "Servant leadership: Development of a multidimensional measure and multi-level assessment," *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19 (2008).

Abstract:

Servant leadership stresses personal integrity and serving others, including employees, customers, and communities. This article focuses on a servant leadership measure that was created by identifying 9 dimensions. Relevant items were then developed and subjected to factor analysis with a sample of 298 students, resulting in a 7-factor solution. Using an organizational sample of 182 individuals, we verified this 7-factor model with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We further validated our 28-item servant leadership scale by regressing outcomes on the servant leadership dimensions, controlling for transformational leadership and leader-member exchange (LMX) in a multi-level hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) analysis. The results suggest that servant leadership is a multidimensional construct and at the individual level makes a unique contribution beyond transformational leadership and LMX in explaining community citizenship behaviors, in-role performance, and organizational commitment. No between-leader (group level) differences were found in the outcomes variables.

To order a copy of the article from the publisher, click **here**.

To download a copy of the servant leadership measure developed by Dr. Liden and his colleagues, click **here**.

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Mitchell J. Neubert, K. Michele Kacmar, Dawn S. Carlson, Lawrence B. Chonko, and James A. Roberts, "Regulatory Focus as a Mediator of the Influence of Initiating Structure and Servant Leadership on Employee Behavior," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2008, Vol. 93, No. 6.

Abstract:

In this research, the authors test a model in which the regulatory focus of employees at work mediates the influence of leadership on employee behavior. In a nationally representative sample of 250 workers who responded over 2 time periods, prevention focus mediated the relationship of initiating structure to in-role performance and deviant behavior, whereas promotion focus mediated the relationship of servant leadership to helping and creative behavior. The results indicate that even though initiating structure and servant leadership share some variance in explaining other variables, each leadership style incrementally predicts disparate outcomes after controlling for the other style and dispositional tendencies. A new regulatory focus scale, the Work Regulatory Focus (WRF) Scale, also was developed and initially validated for this study. Implications for the results and the WRF Scale are discussed.

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Mark G. Ehrhart, "Leadership and Procedural Justice Climate as Antecedents of Unit-Level Organizational Citizenship Behavior," *Personnel Psychology*, 2004, Vol. 57.

Abstract:

Despite an abundance of research conducted on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) at the individual level of analysis, relatively little is known about unit-level OCB. To investigate the antecedents of unit-level OCB, data were collected from employees of 249 grocery store departments. Structural

equation modeling techniques were used to test a model in which procedural justice climate was hypothesized to partially mediate the relationship between leadership behavior (servant leadership) and unit-level OCB. Models were tested using both employee ratings and manager ratings of unit-level OCB. The results gave general support for the hypotheses, although there were some differences depending on the source of the OCB ratings (supervisor or subordinate), whether the type of department was controlled for, and whether a common method variance factor was included. Overall, the evidence generally supported the association of both servant leadership and procedural justice climate with unit-level OCB. Building on the current study, a multilevel framework for the study of OCB is presented in conjunction with a discussion of future research directions in four specific areas.

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Emily M. Hunter, Mitchell J. Neubert, Sara Jansen Perry, L.A. Witt, Lisa M. Penney, and Evan Weinberger, E. (2013). Servant leaders inspire servant followers: Antecedents and outcomes for employees and the organization. *The Leadership Quarterly, 24* (2), 316-331.

Abstract:

Despite widespread adoption of servant leadership, we are only beginning to understand its true utility across multiple organizational levels. Our purpose was to test the relationship between personality, servant leadership, and critical follower and organizational outcomes. Using a social influence framework, we proposed that leader agreeableness and extraversion affect follower perceptions of servant leadership. In turn, servant leaders ignite a cycle of service by role-modeling servant behavior that is then mirrored through coworker helping behavior and high-quality customer service, as well as reciprocated through decreased withdrawal. Using a multilevel, multi-source model, we surveyed 224 stores of a U.S. retail organization, including 425 followers, 110 store managers, and 40 regional managers. Leader agreeableness was positively and extraversion was negatively related to servant leadership, which was associated with decreased follower turnover intentions and disengagement. At the group-level, service climate

mediated the effects of servant leadership on follower turnover intentions, helping and sales behavior.

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Fred O. Walumbwa, Chad A. Hartnell, and Adegoke Oke, "Servant Leadership, Procedural Justice Climate, Service Climate, Employee Attitudes, and Organizational Citizenship Behavior: A Cross-Level Investigation," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2010, Vol. 95, No. 3.

Abstract:

This study tests the influence of servant leadership on 2 group climates, employee attitudes, and organizational citizenship behavior. Results from a sample of 815 employees and 123 immediate supervisors revealed that commitment to the supervisor, self-efficacy, procedural justice climate, and service climate partially mediated the relationship between servant leadership and organizational citizenship behavior. Cross-level interaction results revealed that procedural justice climate and positive service climate amplified the influence of commitment to the supervisor on organizational citizenship behavior. Implications of these results for theory and practice and directions for future research are discussed.

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David M. Mayer, Mary Bardes, and Ronald F. Piccolo, "Do servant-leaders help satisfy follower needs? An organizational justice perspective" *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 2008, 17 (2).

Abstract:

While theoretical work has discussed the link between servant-leadership and the satisfaction of follower needs, empirical research has yet to examine this relationship. The present article seeks to fill this void by reporting on a survey study (*n*=187) linking servant-leadership to follower need and job satisfaction through the mediating mechanism of organizational justice.

Drawing on the multiple needs model of justice, self-determination theory, needs-based theories of job satisfaction, and the servant-leadership literature, we find support for a theoretical model linking servant-leadership to job satisfaction with organizational justice and need satisfaction as mediators of this relationship.

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Mitchell J. Neubert, Emily M. Hunter, and Remy C. Tolentino, "A servant leader and their stakeholders: When does organizational structure enhance a leader's influence?" *The Leadership Quarterly*, 2016, 27.

Abstract:

Accumulating evidence finds servant leadership is related to critical employee and organizational criteria, but only a limited amount of studies link servant leaders to both internal and external stakeholder outcomes. Moreover, there remains a great deal to learn regarding the conditions under which this influence is enhanced or diminished. We address these limitations in the literature by testing a multilevel model that hypothesizes servant leadership is related to nurse behavior and satisfaction as well as patient satisfaction. Further, drawing upon contingency theory, we test a contextual moderator, organizational structure, as a potential enhancer of the relationships between servant leadership and these outcomes. Using a sample of 1485 staff nurses and 105 nurse managers at nine hospitals, we demonstrated that servant leadership is directly related to more nurse helping and creative behavior, and it is related to patient satisfaction through nurse job satisfaction. Also, organizational structure acted as a moderator to enhance the influence of servant leadership on creative behavior as well as patient satisfaction through nurse job satisfaction. Limitations and future research directions are discussed.

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Junfeng Wu, Robert C. Liden, Chenwei Liao, and Sandy J. Wayne. "Does manager servant leadership lead to follower serving behaviors? It depends

on follower self-interest." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 106 (1), Jan. 2021, 152-167.

Abstract:

One distinguishing feature of servant leadership is the proposition that servant leaders develop followers who also engage in serving behaviors. Drawing upon social learning theory, we argue that follower dispositional self-interest is a boundary condition affecting the transference of manager servant leadership to follower engagement in serving behaviors, and that follower serving self-efficacy is the underlying psychological mechanism. In a laboratory experiment (Study 1), we manipulated manager servant leadership and found support for the hypothesis that the positive relationship between manager servant leadership and follower serving behaviors is significantly enhanced for participants high in self-interest. The serving behaviors of participants low in self-interest was not affected by the degree to which the manager practiced servant leadership. In a field study (Study 2) with a sample representing 10 diverse organizations in Singapore, we replicated the findings. In another laboratory experiment (Study 3), we demonstrated that follower serving self-efficacy mediated the interactional effect found in the first two studies, supporting the social learning account for the transference of manager servant leadership to follower serving behaviors. Taken together, converging results from these three studies demonstrate that servant leaders are capable of bringing out serving behaviors especially among followers with a strong focus on their own self-interest.

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b. *Effectiveness of the leader*

Laura Reave, "Spiritual values and practices related to leadership effectiveness," *The Leadership Quarterly* 16 (2005)

Abstract:

This review of over 150 studies shows that there is a clear consistency between spiritual values and practices and effective leadership. Values that have long been considered spiritual ideals, such as integrity, honesty, and humility, have been demonstrated to have an effect on leadership success. Similarly, practices traditionally associated with spirituality as demonstrated in daily life have also been shown to be connected to leadership effectiveness. All of the following practices have been emphasized in many spiritual teachings, and they have also been found to be crucial leadership skills: showing respect for others, demonstrating fair treatment, expressing caring and concern, listening responsively, recognizing the contributions of others, and engaging in reflective practice.

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Suzanne J. Peterson, Benjamin M. Galvin, and Donald Lange, "CEO Servant Leadership: Exploring Executive Characteristics and Firm Performance," *Personnel Psychology* (2012) 65

Abstract:

This study offers an examination of the relationships between chief executive officer (CEO) servant leadership, the executive characteristics of narcissism, founder status, and organizational identification, and firm performance in a sample of 126 CEOs in technology organizations. Analysis of data gathered over multiple periods revealed a negative relationship between CEO narcissism and servant leadership, and a positive relationship between founder status (i.e., founder or nonfounder) and servant leadership. Furthermore, CEO organizational identification served as a partial mediating mechanism linking narcissism and founder status to servant leadership. In turn, CEO servant leadership predicted subsequent firm performance (measured as return on assets). The results of this study have implications for researchers interested in better understanding the predictors and consequences of servant leadership and for practitioners concerned with combatting negative or selfish executive leadership behaviors and employing servant leadership for the organization's benefit.

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Allan Lee, Joanne Lyubovnikova, Amy Wei Tan, and Caroline Knight, "Servant leadership: A meta-analytic examination of incremental contribution, moderation, and mediation," *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* (2020), 93, 1-44.

Abstract:

Research suggests that when leaders, as servant leaders, focus on their followers' needs, this can have a positive effect on organizational functioning. Yet results are inconsistent in establishing the strength of the relationships, limiting understanding of the theoretical impact and practical reach of the servant leadership (SL) construct. Using a quantitative meta-analysis based on 130 independent studies, the current research provides evidence that SL has incremental predictive validity over transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership. Further, the link between SL and a range of individual- and team-level behavioural outcomes can be partially explained by trust in the leader, procedural justice, and leader-member exchange. The paper also explores moderators to better establish SL's criterion-related validity and to clarify the magnitude of effects across boundary conditions, such as research design, national culture, and industry.

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Chenwei Liao, Hun Whee Lee, Russell E. Johnson, and Szu-Han (Joanna) Lin, "Serving You Depletes Me? A Leader-Centric Examination of Servant Leadership Behaviors," *Journal of Management*, 2020.

Abstract:

Leader behaviors are dynamic and vary over time, and leaders' actions at a given time can have ramifications for their subsequent behavior. Taking such a dynamic perspective on leader behaviors, we examined daily servant leadership behavior and its downstream effects on the leaders themselves

form a within-person self-regulation perspective. Results from two experience sampling studies consistently revealed that engaging in daily servant leadership behavior can come at a cost for the leaders. Specifically, for leaders who are low in perspective taking, engaging in servant leadership behavior was associated with increases in same-day depletion and next-day withdrawal from their leadership role (i.e., greater laissez-faire behavior). However, for leaders who frequently exercise perspective taking, engaging in daily servant leadership behavior was instead associated with decreases in depletion and subsequent laissez-faire behavior, suggesting that servant leadership behaviors are replenishing for these individuals. Experience in perspective taking is therefore a key individual difference that determines whether enacting servant leadership behavior is beneficial or detrimental for leaders. We discuss theoretical and practical implications of our findings and provide avenues for future leadership research.

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c. *Serving customers*

Zhijun Chen, Jing Zhu, and Mingjian Zhou. "How does a servant leader fuel the service fire? A multilevel model of servant leadership, individual self identity, group competition climate, and customer service performance." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 100 (2), Mar. 2015, 511-521.

Abstract:

Building on a social identity framework, our cross-level process model explains how a manager's servant leadership affects frontline employees' service performance, measured as service quality, customer-focused citizenship behavior, and customer-oriented prosocial behavior. Among a sample of 238 hairstylists in 30 salons and 470 of their customers, we found that hair stylists' self-identity embedded in the group, namely, self-efficacy and group identification, partially mediated the positive effect of salon managers' servant leadership on stylists' service performance as rated by the customers, after taking into account the positive influence of transformational leadership. Moreover, group competition climate strengthened the positive relationship between self-efficacy and service performance.

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Fernando Jaramillo, Douglas B. Grisaffe, Lawrence B. Chonko, and James A. Roberts. (2009). "Examining the Impact of Servant Leadership on Sales Force Performance." *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management,* 2009, *29*(3), 257-275.

Abstract:

Much has been written about the importance of focusing on customers to drive organizational success. In this paper, aspects of manager–salesperson relationships are examined as drivers of deeper customer focus in salesperson–customer interactions. In particular, managers' servant leadership, a leadership style emphasizing genuine concern for subordinate welfare, is examined as a catalyst of parallel concern by salespeople for their customers. Salesperson perceptions of managers' servant leadership empirically relate to salesperson customer orientation, in turn driving adaptive selling behaviors, customer-directed extra-role behaviors, and sales performance outcomes. Other results and implications for management and sales leadership research are presented.

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d. *Serving all stakeholders*

G. James Lemoine, Nathan Eva, Jeremy D. Meuser, Patricia Falotico, "Organizational performance with a broader focus: The case for a stakeholder approach to leadership," *Business Horizons*, Kelley School of Business, Indiana University, 2020.

Abstract:

In 2019, BlackRock CEO Larry Fink, Apple CEO Tim Cook, and the other 179 CEO members of the Business Roundtable argued that the purpose of a corporation must reflect not only the fiduciary interests of owners but also the varied interests of all stakeholders: employees, customers, partners, and broader society. This idea challenges a decades-old norm of shareholder

primacy, so it is reasonable for organizational leaders to wonder whether doing so is trul in their firms' best interests, and if so, how to implement this approach to leadership. To answer these questions, we draw on over 200 peer-reviewed articles covering leadership research to demonstrate how servant leadership, a stakeholder-focused approach to management, outperforms other leadership approaches across both shareholder and stakeholder criteria. We leverage case studies of organizational leaders from SAS, Zappos, Starbucks, and Jason's Deli, financially successful organizations that exemplify how managers provide value and sustainability to stakeholders and shareholders through servant leadership. We also include practical steps managers can take to begin putting this form of leadership into practice.

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Jacob M. Rose, "Corporate Directors and Social Responsibility: Ethics versus Shareholder Value," *Journal of Business Ethics* (2007) 73: 319-331.

Abstract:

This paper reports on the results of an experiment conducted with experienced corporate directors. The study findings indicate that directors employ prospective rationality cognition, and they sometimes make decisions that emphasize legal defensibility at the expense of personal ethics and social responsibility. Directors recognize the ethical and social implications of their decisions, but they believe that current corporate law requires them to pursue legal courses of action that maximize shareholder value. The results suggest that additional ethics education will have little influence on the decisions of many business leaders because their decisions are driven by corporate law, rather than personal ethics.

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G. James Lemoine, Chad A. Hartnell, and Hannes Leroy, H. "Taking Stock of Moral Approaches to Leadership: An Integrative Review of Ethical,

Authentic, and Servant Leadership," *Academy of Management Annals*, 2019 13(1), 148-187.

Abstract:

Moral forms of leadership such as ethical, authentic, and servant leadership have seen a surge of interest in the 21st century. The proliferation of morally based leadership approaches has resulted in theoretical confusion and empirical overlap that mirror substantive concerns within the larger leadership domain. Our integrative review of this literature reveals connections with moral philosophy that provide a useful framework to better differentiate the specific moral content (i.e., deontology, virtue ethics, and consequentialism) that undergirds ethical, authentic, and servant leadership, respectively. Taken together, this integrative review clarifies points of integration and differentiation among moral approaches to leadership and delineates avenues for future research that promise to build complementary rather than redundant knowledge regarding how moral approaches to leadership inform the broader leadership domain.

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Kent M. Keith, "The Shareholder Primacy Issue," Appendix from *Servant Leadership in the Boardroom: Fulfilling the Public Trust* (Westfield, Indiana: The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2011)

Abstract:

In this article, Keith reviews the Michigan court case that is falsely used to justify shareholder primacy in the United States; argues that shareholders own shares, not the corporation; describes the benefits of recognizing all stakeholders, not just shareholders; and explains that the law in the United States supports director primacy and the business judgement rule, not shareholder primacy.

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