



## What if Servant Leadership Wasn't Called *Servant* Leadership?

By JJ Musgrove



What if servant leadership had not been initially labeled *servant* leadership? How many times has this been pondered as this value-laden leadership concept evolved? And why does the name itself present an impediment for implementation, empirical researching, and overall comprehension? Could we not argue that the oxymoronic implication the terminology suggests has hindered the spirited and necessary debate within leadership, management and organizational behavioral circles, both academic and anecdotal, to nearly subjugate this important leadership theory to others such as transformational or authentic leadership?

This brief essay is not intended to offer substantiated results of exhaustive research that are based on testing terminologies and definitions in an effort to “poll”, if you will, labels that might be less controversial. But when most – at least in my experience – conversations about servant leadership begin with an obligatory and extensive discussion on the terminology itself rather than on the characteristics of the theory, it causes me to wonder what if our beloved founder, Mr. Greenleaf, had selected another term. Of course one could make the argument that a conversation on the definition of the term aids the overall explanation of the theory. But I will leave that debate for another day.

So what is it specifically about the term servant leadership that creates a barrier to further understanding? I believe that the challenges are primarily three-fold: the contradiction inherent in the term, the religious connotations that are implied and the lack of operational clarity offered by the theory's title. I offer the suggestion that a slight adjustment to the theory terminology e.g. *the name of it* could open the door to further acceptance within the wider community.

Servant and its entomological cousin, service, by its very definition imply assuming an inferior position to a *master* or *leader*. Those who are either in positions of leadership or those who aggressively seek these offices (which causes its own set of servant leadership implementation issues) are immediately disengaged when they encounter passive terminology. How can one *effectively* and *efficiently* lead while taking an inferior posture. Moving past this initial barrier may be accomplished if the individual is able to transform *servant* into *supporting* or, better yet, into *stewardship* rather than focusing on the more stereotypical passive role of a servant.

Issues of faith are complicated within a standard corporate environment. Not only does there exist an intangible quality to one's belief system that varies greatly across the world but also there are human resource and legal implications that have to be seriously considered which makes the discussion of religion taboo within most situations. The frequent use of the term servant within religious circles as well as the well-used example of Jesus Christ as the pinnacle of servant leadership has given the impression to many that servant leadership is strictly a faith based approach to leadership and may work in those arenas but not in a serious business environment.

Compounding this issue is the servant leadership community itself. There have been many academic programs that have emerged that teach servant leadership and have attempted to define the theory for future research. Many of these "centers" have emerged at faith-based institutions that teach the subject within a biblical context. Certainly there are moral parallels within servant leadership that align well with religious instructions but until the servant leadership community matures past "do these things because they are the right thing to do" and into demonstrating compelling, measurable increases in output; the theory will continue to remain primarily anecdotal.

Finally, the term does not provide implicit instructions on *how to implement* the style. Authentic leadership means to lead authentically. Transformational leadership means to lead by transforming. When our hypothetical corporate leader stumbles across servant leadership, although those of us within the subculture know that it means to lead by serving, to the CEO this immediately brings up connotations of inferiority which brings us back to square one of this essay. What if servant leadership was not called servant leadership?

I ask this question merely to generate conversation on a clear hindrance to the development of this wonderful leadership concept. Is it possible to alter the labeling terminology to open up the concept to further research or is the fact that the term "servant" being in the definition give the theory strength and separation from other value-laden leadership approaches? What other terms could be applied to allow the theory to gain more widespread recognition?

***About the author:***

**JJ Musgrove is currently the Director of Donor Services, Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley in Columbus, Georgia. He joined the community foundation's staff in April of 2011 after serving for six and a half years as the executive director of the Columbus Symphony Orchestra in the same city. He has a bachelor of arts in theatre from Graceland University in Lamoni, Iowa, and a masters of arts in theatre from the University of Central Missouri. He is currently enrolled in the masters of organizational leadership, servant leadership track at Columbus State University. He is a featured speaker on arts administration, nonprofit leadership and fundraising, and value-laden leadership theories. He is a member of the Greenleaf Center on servant leadership and serves on the panels of the Columbus Cultural Arts Alliance and the Georgia Council for the Arts.**

This material is copyright protected. No part of this document may be reproduced, in any form or by any means without permission from weLEAD Incorporated. Copyright waiver may be acquired from the [weLEAD website](#).