LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA: BENEFITS, CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES OF ADOPTING SERVANT LEADERSHIP MODEL BY DEPARTMENT CHAIRS

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ABSTRACT

Effective leadership is crucial to the success of every academic institution. In Saudi higher education, the pressure has increased on department chairs to achieve the departmental goals required for the general reform of the country. Therefore, the type of leadership that the chairs adopt and express plays a significant role in the progress of the department. Servant leadership is a contemporary approach that has gained increasing acceptance in leadership and organisational literature. From this point of view, this study aims to identify the possible effects of embracing servant leadership by department chairs, and to determine the strengths and weaknesses that the style could bring to the department. A qualitative inquiry using semi-structured interview designed around a vignette was used to elicit the perspectives of 14 department chairs on adopting servant leadership. The finding indicates that servant leadership has positive impacts in the working environment which can be taken advantage of. However, some drawbacks were noted which could impact the department negatively if the style was not used properly. Some challenges for implementing the style also emerged.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature as it depicts the effectiveness of servant leadership practices for department chairs in the Saudi higher education context which currently lack studies that investigate contemporary leadership at departmental level. The study used qualitative approaches which contribute to the methodology of the research of higher education in Saudi Arabia, in which most of the collected data are quantitative in nature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership is crucial to the success of every academic institution. However, no secret formula exists guaranteed to create the successful leader. Different factors play significant roles in forming the effective leader. Buller (2013) suggests defining effective leadership in the academic context as positive leadership. He explained positive leadership as creating positive relationships, a positive climate and positive communication.

In higher education, departmental leadership is one of the more challenging tasks. Yet it can be a rewarding opportunity to influence everyone within the department. With the reform in higher education in Saudi Arabia, there is an overwhelming desire to achieve world-class standards, but there is a lack of adequate understanding of what has to be done to achieve that. More specifically, Saudi universities still struggle with a lack of leadership effectiveness to promote creativity, innovation and collaboration (Smith and Abouammoh, 2013). The Ministry of Higher Education has started to realise the need for leadership development; thus, the establishment of Academic Leadership Centre in 2009. Yet the focus is on Saudi universities' deans and occasionally involves department

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chairs. Most department chairs who serve today have an inadequate understanding of leadership practices (Wheeler, 2009). This phenomenon results from the common assumption that if a person is a good researcher or teacher and has long experience, they will be an effective departmental chair. Department chairs in Saudi Arabia, like many other educational leaders in the country, are selected based on this assumption. They do not acquire the required preparation for such a leadership role.

Today, the pressure has increased on department chairs to achieve the departmental goals required for the general reform of the country. A newly appointed department chair usually is eager to make positive change, helping students and faculty to achieve their goals. Also, the transition from faculty member to department chair necessitates altering the focus from one's individual achievements to the development of the department as whole. Therefore, the type of leadership that the chairs adopt and express plays a significant role in the progress of the department. However, the question remains: which leadership approach is most applicable and practical for academic chairs?

Throughout history, different leadership styles have emerged to serve the needs of their time. Servant leadership is a contemporary approach that has gained increasing acceptance in leadership and organisational literature. Many works by writers such as Greenleaf (1977) and Sipe and Frick (2009) have asserted that servant leadership reinforces ethical, insightful and principle-centred decisions. From that point of view, this study aims to identify the possible effects of embracing servant leadership by department chairs and to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the style at the departmental level.

This study is intended for academic leaders, educators and individuals who have responsibility to others and who want to practice contemporary leadership style, with understanding of the strength and pitfalls of such a style.

Studies that focus on leadership in higher education are still scarce and have not shown meaningful progress as Esen *et al.* (2018) found in their evaluation of research in higher education over two decades. The evolution of academic leadership has been inevitable given the complexity of the role, and the general lack of a leadership background in most candidates. In addition, for an active academic department to function as an integral unit in higher education, the department chair must demonstrate an effective leadership style. They needs leadership, training and experience to be able to perform their duties effectively. This study reinforces the need for the professional developer to incorporate a leadership style with an understanding of its strength and pitfalls, and then tailor it to fit the organisation and its culture.

Since a particular leadership style may be appropriate only to a specific institution, this study is particularly significant because it helps to identify the effectiveness of different leadership styles in different contexts. The results can be used to prepare and equip current chairs and faculty members for future leadership positions. At the same time, it gives insight to those who are interested in leadership, particularly in servant leadership, its strengths and its pitfalls.

Most studies of leadership effectiveness have been conducted at U.S. universities, although some have been done in the UK and Australia. This therefore underlines the need to investigate the current principles of leadership effectiveness in universities in Saudi Arabia. The ambiguity and complexity of the role of department chair (McArthur, 2002; Hecht, 2006; Delener, 2013) increases the stress on the chair's occupant who must its significant challenges. Yet there has been little empirical research into effective leadership practices that might assist department chairs in this regard (Bryman, 2007). Hence, this study is a real contribution to the literature as it illustrates the effectiveness of servant leadership for department chairs, and may be used as a guide for others occupying that role.

Research can serve as a catalyst for policy makers to implement positive change. The findings of this study could motivate Saudi universities to design leadership preparation programs that encompass effective practices for department chairs. Such programs would assist current chairs and prepare faculty members who are potential candidates for the leadership positions so they can contribute productively to their organisation.

The last benefit of this study is that it conducted qualitatively. Most of the data collected about higher education in Saudi Arabia are quantitative in nature. However, Smith and Abouammoh (2013) pointed out that as this is intended to generate original insights concerning the improvement of higher education, it would be best served by using qualitative methods.

1.1. Departmental Leadership

The position of department chair is crucial as it represents a link between the faculty and higher administration. The department chair is a conduit to convey faculty concerns to the upper administrators and convey the upper administrators' decisions to the faculty. Some of the phrases used in the literature to describe the position of chair emphasise this aspect of the role. The chair can also be likened to Janus, the Roman deity known for having two faces, such representing the dual roles of colleague and administrator (McArthur, 2002). Tucker described it in 1981 as being "first among equals," meaning in this context that the p chair is occupied by a faculty member (Riley and Russell, 2013). However, this definition is not universally applicable because of its inherent ambiguities and in the varying methods of selecting chairs (Vanblaere and Devos, 2018).

The essence of departmental leadership is the ability to build a collective functionality that fulfils the objectives of both department and institution (Gmelch, 2004; Chu, 2006; Vanblaere and Devos, 2018). Accordingly, chairs are tasked with numerous disparate roles and responsibilities. But although they undertake challenging responsibilities which require effective, forward-thinking leadership, academic leaders tends to embrace more traditional approaches (Anthony and Antony, 2017).

Most chairs today have little leadership training (Wheeler, 2009; McCaffery, 2018). The appointment of a chair is usually based on the assumption that whoever is excellent in teaching and research will be excellent in leading the department (Wheeler). Moreover, in the setting of Saudi universities, there is another assumption underlying the appointment of departmental chairs: older faculty members have more experience in administrative responsibilities. Since appointment to this position is usually short term, leadership training tends to be disregarded.

Considering the breadth of the department chair's responsibilities, besides some problematic faculty members who may hinder the progress of the entire department, a proper understanding of leadership assists department chairs to adjust faculty members' performance and conduct. McCaffery (2018) characterised this as self-awareness, understanding the environment and the people, all of which enhance a departmental chair's effectiveness.

1.2. Department Chairs' Responsibilities in the Context of Saudi Universities

Given the hierarchical structure of the educational system, it is somewhat surprising that the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education does not appear to have a formal description of the roles and responsibilities of university department chairs on its official website. However, some universities such as King Saud University and Umm Al-Qura University have published their school's definition of the chair's responsibilities on their websites.

In contrast, King Abdulaziz University and the University of Jeddah websites do not have such a job description. However, through personal communications it was discovered that such is maintained by the development and quality assurance unit. It is not distributed to departmental chairs and consequently is not known to all of them (Personal communication with chairs, October 20th, 2018). The following list describes the chairs' responsibilities:

1) Supervising implementation of the objectives, policies and regulations of the department.
2) Executing decisions decreed by the University Council.
3) Discussing and planning curriculum development through departmental meetings.
4) Providing academic guidance to students in the department.
5) Overseeing the departmental budget.

6) Supervising departmental staff.

7) Encouraging and coordinating research.

8) Channelling recommendations and information between higher administrators and department staff.

9) Creating a climate of transparency with faculty members.

10) Submitting quarterly and annual reports demonstrating the department's activities, needs and recommendations.

11) Ensuring the teaching load is distributed fairly among faculty members.

12) Articulating the department's needs based on the collective views of faculty.

13) Suggesting solutions to any obstacles encountered by the department.

14) Maintaining order and regularity in the department and overseeing the members' commitments to teaching and office hours.

15) Implementing and ensuring the execution of the quality assurance agenda.

16) Supervising the development of academic programs.

17) Supervising student activities within the department.

18) Representing the department in the University Council.

19) Evaluating faculty members.

From a review of the literature on the role and responsibilities of department chairs, it is evident that there is no fixed list of their roles and responsibilities. These remain vague. In addition, not all incoming chairs are provided with a job description. Training new chairs in some of their responsibilities alleviates the ambiguity and stress associated with the role. Moreover, it reinforces departmental effectiveness (Rayburn *et al.*, 2016).

Training prospective department chairs must be an essential agenda and part of the organisational culture before appointing them to the position. For instance, Abu and Youde (2018) in their investigation of the influence of organisational culture on academic leadership, found that centralised environment and strict regulation are some factors that affect professional development for academic leaders. Centralisation was the dominant leadership practice in Saudi for decades. Yet today's leadership has involved shared vision and practices, and more empowerment (Dirani *et al.*, 2017). In addition, a more advanced leadership style needs to be practiced today to fit people's needs.

1.3. Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a style that has attracted significant interest over the last three decades (Seto and Sarros, 2016). It was identified by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970 when he wrote an essay entitled *The Servant as Leader*. He proposed that servant leadership starts with the natural feeling of serving first and then the conscious choice that brings one to aspire to lead (1977). Greenleaf, who coined this concept, Greenleaf (1977) advanced the following thesis:

> The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead… the difference [between leader first or servant first] manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. (p. 27).

Spears (1995) who for many years served as Executive Director of the Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership, compiled a list of ten servant leadership characteristics from Greenleaf's writings. These characteristics are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, foresight, conceptualisation, stewardship, building community and commitment to the growth of the community. As these characteristics suggest, they are concerned with building effective relationships in one's life and in the organisation to balance self-interest and common goals (San

Facon and Spears, 2010). Buller (2019) asserted the significance of approaches to leadership that prioritise helping people and guiding them without judging them. This principle is essential in servant leadership.

The concept of servant leadership is three decades old, yet servant leaders have existed in every major religion (Polleys, 2002). Religious societies have depicted some principles of servant-leadership according to their religious mandates. As an example, for Sarayrah it is the ability to listen, schedule, and plan. According to Boyum (2008) servant leadership has been popular in both secular and scholarly literature, with organisations progressively demanding both ethical and authentic leaders. In their study of the relation between servant leadership and workplace spirituality, Williams *et al.* (2017) confirmed that servant leadership promotes spirituality in the workplace.

The concept of servant leadership was deeply rooted in the Arab culture (Sarayrah, 2004). Before the appearance of Islam, the Bedouin people promoted principles of servant leadership. Many similarities could be found between the pre-Islamic leadership and the practices of servant leadership (Sarayrah). For instance, even in his life before Islam, Omar Bin al-Khattab, one of the Prophet's companions, exhibited many principles of servant leadership such as foresight, mercy, responsibility and good manners.

Later, the Prophet integrated these principles into his practices, ethics and teachings. Some of these principles include: hospitality; keeping covenant; being just, determined, kind, humble, and mild; and living a simple life (Adair, 2010).

Servant leadership is systematically undefined and not yet fully supported by empirical research. However, principles of its development within higher education are still noticeable. It has the potential to create a positive working environment and an effective educational setting (Crippen, 2005).

In their study of the relationship between servant leadership and employee psychological health Rivkin *et al.* (2014) emphasised that there is a positive relationship between the two. However, more studies are needed to investigate servant leadership in the context of higher education.

2. METHODS

This study aimed to identify the possible effectiveness and the challenges of embracing servant leadership by department chairs via the following questions:

1) What are the possible strengths or weaknesses that department chairs could bring by embracing the servant leadership approach at the departmental level?

2) What are the obstacles that prevent department chairs from acting as servant leaders?

The study was designed to be qualitative. Data consists of transcribed interviews along with thematic analysis. Initially an invitation was emailed to 18 department chairs, 14 of whom agreed to participate. After acquiring a consent form, a semi-structured face to face interview was then held to acquire the chairs' perspective regarding servant leadership. Interview questions were designed to cover a wide range of the participants' viewpoints, yet narrow enough to elicit specific viewpoints, as Charmaz (2014) suggested in the conduct of interviews. The use of vignettes which involve imaginary situations is valuable in exploring perceptions, behaviours and attitudes in qualitative research, especially if the situation described in the vignette is not something the respondent has encountered previously. Accordingly, a semi-structured interview designed around the vignette to elicit the participants' perspective of the research's purpose. Each interview took approximately 40 minutes.

The analysis was performed throughout the process of data collection. A research journal was used which included memos, reflections and observations. The journal functioned as a lens that sharpened the researcher's perspective. Charmaz (2014) clarified that memo writing is an intermediate step between data collection and writing the draft. It is also helpful in the early stages of analysis and data coding.

The data were imported into a data analysis program NVivo. The decision to use data analysis software assisted the researcher with managing and organising the data. Using computer software also assisted in storing

the data, locating text associated with particular codes, making comparisons among code labels, and writing and storing memos (Creswell, 2013). The use of software usually promotes the credibility of work because it reduces the human error factor inherent to manual analysis (Welsh, 2002).

This study did not pose any serious ethical problems. The only concern was asking department chairs about servant leadership aspects which might be unfamiliar to them. However, the use of the vignette technique in the interview eliminated this concern when they responded to a hypothetical person and scenario.

As a strategy to overcome bias that might influence the interpretation of data, the member check process suggested by Meriam (2002) was used in checking the interpretation with each of the participants.

3. RESULTS

The participants in this study indicated that servant leadership has positive impacts on academic departments which can be taken advantage of, besides some factors which could impact the department negatively.

3.1. Strengths of Servant Leadership

The strengths of the approach can be seen in the work performance of faculty members, the relationship between members, and in the management of the department. The classification of the strengths of the approach in departmental level is in Table 1.

Work performance. Treating faculty members with integrity and fairness increases their job satisfaction. Moreover, when they feel that their needs and circumstances are considered, they are more prepared to give their best efforts. For instance, as one of the participants articulated, "if I feel that I'm appreciated and my needs are considered, I will search, think and create ideas for improving the work," adding that they will not stop suggesting ideas and initiatives for developing themselves and the department. When chairs care for faculty development because of the conviction that such development will reflect well on the department, faculty members will search for opportunities to keep improving.

Relationship. Many facets of servant leadership enhance relationships between faculty staff, and between staff and their chairs. Faculty members will find their work more meaningful with servant chairs. One participant said, "this type of chair adds value to the work of their faculty". In addition, servant leadership encourages moral behaviours and boosts psychological health. Conflict among faculty members and between them and the chair lessens because of the feeling that they are valued and well-served. All of these factors reduce resistance.

Management of the department. Achieving the goals of a department cannot be fulfilled solely by the chair. The care and attention that they receive from the chairs is reflected in the faculty's commitment to work hand in hand with the chairs to move the department forward and achieve agreed goals. Such an effective commitment is a significant dimension of departmental development.

The orientation of the team is impacted also by the concept of serving first; therefore, accepting directions becomes smoother and is more welcomed. Further, loyalty to the workplace grows accordingly.

Table-1. Benefits of Adopting Servant Leadership at the Departmental Level.

Aspects Affected by Servant Leadership	Positive Impact of Servant Leadership
Work Performance	Nourish creativity
	Increase initiatives
	Enhance professional development
Relationship	Reinforce trust
	Create collegial atmosphere
	Reduce conflict
Management of the Department	Accelerate achievement of goals
	Inspire loyalty
	Accept direction

Table-2. Constraints of Adopting Servant Leadership at the Departmental Level.

Aspects Affected by Servant Leadership	Negative Impact of Servant Leadership
Work Performance	Lack of commitment
	Depending on others
	Denying tasks
Management of the Department	Delay in fulfilling goals
	Needs more of the chairs' time

3.2. The Weaknesses of Servant Leadership

The weakness of servant leadership can emerge in the work performance and management of the department. The classification of the weakness of the style is in Table 2.

Work performance. Faculty members with different personalities and backgrounds do not appreciate servant leadership equally. Participants indicated that servant chairs can be seen as weak leaders. For instance, one of the participants declared "a servant chair pursues others' comfort; rather than fulfilling goals." As a result, some faculty members may take advantage of what they perceive to be a weak leader. Their commitment may then decline, or they may become reliant on others. This may even extend to refusing tasks and responsibilities, or not accepting direction from the chair.

Management of the department. Faculty members and their chairs work as whole to achieve the department's agenda. Hence, when a faculty's work deteriorates, the entirety of the department is affected, including its ability to progress. One participant explained, "allocating time for looking at others' needs delays working on fulfilling the department's goals". In addition, servant leadership can be a factor in less productive use of the chair's time. Some understand the department's goals and can decide what they need to do to achieve those goals. Others, by contrast, require a task broken down into steps in order for it to be fulfilled. In these cases, department chairs need to allocate more time to explain tasks and accommodate other needs.

3.3. Challenges for Adopting the Style

There numbers of obstacles that hinder the application of servant leadership style. Some of these are related to the culture of the workplace, the reaction of followers, and the attitude of leaders. The classifications of the challenges to adopting servant leadership by department chairs are in Table 3.

Workplace culture. The predominant culture has a significant impact on filtering what is acceptable, and vice versa. Some individuals do not react well if required to work outside of their "comfort zone" or have their regular routine disrupted. They may be without experience of servant leadership and will, in consequence, tend to oppose it. The popular belief is that leaders are people who give orders that others follow. Leadership is also often conflated with authority and the centralisation of power, so a leader who prioritises the serving of others may acquire a reputation for weakness.

Followers' reactions. Individual personalities vary greatly so not everyone will appreciate a servant leader. Some may take advantage of the servant leader and become lax in fulfilling their responsibilities. Others who feel that the leader is significantly concerned about their needs may be tempted to exert less effort in performing tasks. Their motivation and productivity can therefore decrease.

Leaders' attitude. Some department chairs hold the predominant belief that leadership is authority. Therefore, practicing servant leadership decreases their authority. Other department chairs believe that practicing an unpopular leadership style necessitates professional preparation for leadership. Hence, the lack of professional preparation for leadership is one of the obstacles to adopting the servant leadership style. On the other hand, some chairs do not have the desire to improve their leadership behaviours and skills, believing that they already possess sufficient know-how. Practicing servant leadership can place the leaders in the position of having to compromise between the followers' and the organisation's interest.

Table-3. Challenges for adopting servant leadership.

The challenges	Dimensions
The culture of the workplace	Preference for regular routine; leaders give order and people follow
	leadership is conflated with authority and centralization
	Serving other attached to being soft
Followers reactions	Taking advantages of a servant leader
	Motivation and productivity can decrease
Leaders' attitude	Believing that leadership is authority
	Difficulty in compromising between the followers' and the organisational interest
	Lack of professional leadership preparation
	Opposing improving leadership practices

4. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the strengths, weakness and challenges in adopting servant leadership by department chairs. Analysis of the accumulated data indicates that servant leadership is a perfectly viable leadership style that can bring increased effectiveness to the department and the university. Nonetheless, it does have certain drawbacks that could weaken the leader's performance in leading the department if not properly implemented.

The nature of departmental work necessitates consistent interaction between the chair and faculty members. Servant leadership is a distinctive approach in which a leader is a servant first. People naturally like to feel that their needs and interest are taken care of. Their satisfaction with their leaders is then reflected positively. This phenomenon is noted in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Human motivation increases and moves to the next level if individuals' needs for belonging and self-esteem are satisfied by respect and the recognition of their peers. Accordingly, when faculty members sense that they are being served and considered, they are motivated to give more. However, different personalities react differently to the organisational environment. Some may take advantage of this consideration, put less effort into their tasks and rely on others. Hence, the effective use of servant leadership means deriving benefit from the positive implications of servant leadership. These include engaging with others and helping them to reach their potential, while attempting to avoid the drawbacks.

Servant leadership has its essential roots in religious teaching. Its principles are fundamental elements of Islamic teachings (Al-Mubarakpuri, 1979; Sarayrah, 2004; Boyum, 2008). Considering that Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state, implementing this approach in a department enhances the spirituality, especially as in Islam there is no detachment of religion to everyday life. Furthermore, the principles of servant leadership are deeply rooted in the Arab culture, as Sarayrah found. Therefore, servant leadership is not an unknown or peculiar approach. Still, it needs more understanding to be used effectively.

The core functions of the academic environment are teaching, research and community service, all three of which fit well with the service orientation of servant leadership. Although the concept of servant leadership may provide the seed of an effective relationship and productive learning environment as Crippen (2005) emphasised, it can be approached negatively. Further, the concept is not free from criticism. However, if the notion is understood that being a servant leader does not entail losing authority, its potential positive impact is considerable. For instance, as Wolverton et al. (2005) emphasised, department chairs need to have the skills to reinforce collegiality, set direction, and deal with conflict, all of which can be achieved by the servant leader.

The challenges of adopting the style can be met by increasing the level of understanding about leadership approaches and their appropriate uses. Also, linking the approach to Islamic belief makes it more acceptable in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the servant leader of a department need not show weakness provided they maintain a firm and equitable approach to emergent leadership issues. With regard to the challenges of personal belief that cause resistance to the implementation of a new leadership approach, stressing the importance of professional development and enabling faculty members to attend such courses and programs contributes to modifying these beliefs.

5. CONCLUSION

Servant leadership has great potential to create better relationships in educational institutions overall, including at the departmental level. Departments can achieve true progress by the inclusion of its faculty members. Regression analysis has emphasised that servant leadership contributes to faculty retention by helping faculty members to reach their full professional potential. However, it can be a factor in undermining morale within the faculty, allowing some members to escape their responsibilities. However, an accurate understanding of the concept – which is a blend of leader and servant who does not lose leadership qualities or submit to others – makes for an effective department chair. The feature of this chair is a proficiency in obtaining the best from others to the benefit not only of the department, but the university as a whole.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is a constant challenge today to provide better service and raise the reputation of an organisation. Servant leadership is a style that emphasises the engagement of others. To raise awareness of it, more professional development is needed, such as the provision of programs, courses and workshops to inculcate the values of effective leadership. In addition, these courses should point out the drawbacks or misconceptions of some aspects of servant leadership in order to avoid the pitfalls.

The predominant cultural belief that conflates leadership with authority must be adjusted gradually by providing courses and real-world examples of effective leaders to open the door to more effective leadership practices.

The servant leadership style still suffers from a lack of research as it applies within educational organisations. More studies of its use in a cross-section of such organisations may result in more positive applications of it. In addition, studies can encourage policymakers to embark on the road to an effective leadership style by reducing or eliminating the associated challenges.

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