
AN EXAMINATION OF SERVANT LEADER FACULTY CHAIRS EMPOWERING FACULTY DURING A CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

The ability to flourish during a crisis requires a unique skill set focused on emotional, psychological, and social well-being. As COVID-19 swept the nation, academic administrators faced many difficult decisions surrounding emergency remote learning as well as the health and safety of students and faculty. While some leaders found themselves able to guide their teams and lead them to success despite the pandemic that surrounded them, others stumbled. This quantitative study surveyed traditional full-time faculty (FTF) (n = 29) and online full-time faculty (OFTF) (n = 51) at a Southwestern university to examine the relationship between faculty self-empowerment, faculty flourishing, and faculty chair servant leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. An analysis of all faculty found a significant correlation between all variables. An examination of just the FTF respondents found a significant correlation between chair servant leadership and faculty flourishing as well as between faculty self-empowerment and flourishing, but it did not find a correlation between chair servant leadership and faculty self-empowerment. An analysis of the OFTF respondents found a significant correlation between all variables. These results indicate that higher levels of faculty chair servant leadership are linked with faculty self-empowerment and faculty flourishing. As such, promoting a servant leadership mindset in faculty chairs may be pivotal in promoting faculty effectiveness via increased self-efficacy (which may be of increased importance during times of educational turmoil such during the pandemic). Notably this relationship may be even more important in the online context, while outside sources may play a greater role in empowering faculty on campus.

Key words: characteristics of servant leadership, crisis management, COVID-19, higher education, online faculty empowerment, pandemic, traditional faculty empowerment, servant leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic tested the landscape of higher education as it was forced to adapt to emergency remote learning (Mladenova et al., 2020). Through this crisis, the quality of leadership competence, economic disparity of schools, quality of administrative services, types of students, and ability

of teachers became even more crucial (Rahman et al., 2020). These challenges further amplify the role of servant-leadership, self-empowerment, and flourishing in higher education.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Academic leaders and administrators must utilize creative solutions to augment faculty

empowerment and their ability to flourish during a crisis situation. Key areas related to leadership in a crisis that have been identified in the literature include the leadership characteristics of listening (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020), self-sacrifice (Johnson, 2020), transparency (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Johnson, 2020), foresight (Boin, et al., 2013), empathy, compassion, flexibility (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020), humility (Boese, 2020; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020), awareness (Boin et al., 2013; Pathak & Dey, 2020), vulnerability (Boese, 2020; Boin, et al., 2013), altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Pathak & Dey, 2020), all of which result in positive employee attitude (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020), motivation (Martini & Sarmawa, 2019; Mustajab, et al., 2020), and innovation (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

LEADING DURING A PANDEMIC

Leading in a crisis takes a series of executive tasks that include early recognition, sensemaking, making critical decisions, orchestrating vertical and horizontal coordination, coupling and decoupling, meaning making, communicating, the rendering accountability, learning, and, lastly, the ability to enhance resilience (Boin et al., 2013). Beyond the executive tasks required for effective crisis management, Boese (2020) proposes that the post pandemic workplace will face an even greater challenge than it is currently experiencing. As such, organizations will need to plan ahead and focus on areas including enhanced customer focus and increased business agility, employee well-being, and a more in-depth evaluation of modern leadership.

Adapting to life after the COVID-19 pandemic ends will take considerable effort for those in leadership positions (Cronin-Gilmore et al., 2021). The current literature appears to be trending toward ethical leadership models (Pathak & Dey, 2019). An emerging theory found in the ethical leadership literature is that of servant leadership. Servant-leadership, a term first coined by Robert Greenleaf, is a follower-focused approach to leading (Hammond, 2018; Pathak & Dey, 2019; Stauffer & Maxwell, 2020).

The qualities of servant leadership are paramount to identifying opportunities in a crisis

situation and acting on them. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) observed how leaders in academia were frantic when conducting workshops to familiarize faculty with modern remote digital teaching and learning tools. The behavior of leaders and how they handled and managed this crisis in academia was reflected in how faculty and students transitioned into uncharted territory (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Fernandez and Shaw (2020) went on to suggest practical strategies leaders can use in a time of educational crisis, such as connecting with people, distributing leadership, and communicating clearly. Johnson (2020) suggested that crisis situations are not supposed to bring out the worst in people but are an opportunity for leaders to shine and be more charismatic, if they lead selflessly.

FOLLOWER IMPACT

The impact on followers resulting from the leader-follower relationship has been extensively reviewed in the literature, though not extensively in the context of the current pandemic or in the context of a crisis. Stauffer and Maxwell (2020), for example, examined the relationship between transforming servant leadership attitudes and behaviors into organizational culture and change strategies. Their findings illuminate the importance of leadership behaviors and organizational culture in organizational strategy accomplishment. Pathak and Dey (2019) also examined leader behaviors in research focused on the relationship between servant leadership and employee psychological well-being. Their findings suggest a significant positive relationship exists between the two constructs).

Martini and Sarmawa (2019) spoke to the influences on employee performance in their research, which aimed to identify the relationship between work culture and employee motivation on employee performance. Their findings indicate a significantly positive relationship between work culture and employee motivation and between motivation and performance. As such, they postulate that work motivation plays a mediating role in the relationship between work culture and employee performance.

Mustajab et al. (2020) examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on work productivity. Their findings reveal several advantages, including work-life balance, and disadvantages such as

frequent interruptions. A prevalent theme in the findings point to reduced employee productivity.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Three theoretical foundations frame this study: servant leadership, self-empowerment, and flourishing. The research questions and justification for method and measurement were examined with Greenleaf's (1970) seminal servant leadership theory as a foundation and were used to examine how university administrator faculty chair servant leadership and faculty self-empowerment and flourishing are related. The Servant Leadership Questionnaire (SLQ) developed by Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) was used to operationalize Greenleaf's (1970) philosophy of servant leadership based on its five conceptual characteristics of altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship.

There is growing interest in understanding empowerment in the context of the leader-follower relationship. Teacher empowerment is explained by Short (1994) as a process that involves academic leaders sharing power, allowing autonomy, and giving direct reports an opportunity to grow through skill development and opportunities to engage in decision making. The relationship between administrator servant leadership, faculty self-empowerment, and the resulting opportunities to flourish was operationalized using Short and Rinehart's (1992) School Participant Empowerment Scale (SPES) using the six themes of decision making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact (1992).

According to Rautenbach and Rothmann (2017), flourishing is a term that explains one's work life as going well and that one is functioning well. The relationship between faculty chair servant leadership, faculty self-empowerment, and flourishing at work was operationalized using Rautenbach and Rothmann's (2017) Flourishing at Work Scale-Short Form (FWS-SF) based on three items of emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being. The research questions of this study directly align with the theoretical foundations of servant-leadership, faculty empowerment, and flourishing.

There were two research questions in this study. The first research question was: What, if any, significant relationship exists with Online

Full-Time Faculty (OFTF) self-empowerment as measured by the SPES, and flourishing of OFTF as measured by the FWS-SF, and faculty chair servant leadership as measured by the SLQ during the COVID-19 pandemic? Research question two was: What, if any, significant relationship exists with Full-Time Faculty (FTF) self-empowerment as measured by the SPES, and flourishing of FTF as measured by the FWS-SF, and faculty chair servant leadership as measured by the SLQ during the COVID-19 pandemic?

METHOD

This study used a quantitative correlational design to investigate what, if any, significant relationship exists with faculty self-empowerment, faculty flourishing, and faculty chair servant leadership in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Quantitative research encompasses a few key components including numerically measuring variables, testing hypotheses, and using statistical analyses to determine the relationship between the variables in a research study (Meyers et al., 2017). Calculations were made to evaluate the strength of scores between the variables. Next, the variables were evaluated using multiple correlation in order to review all the variables together and identify all potential relationships between the variables "self-empowerment," "flourishing," and "servant leadership" (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). The intent of this study was to examine the strength, direction, and significance of the relationships between the variables, making a correlational design the most appropriate quantitative research approach.

VARIABLES

This study includes the predictor variable servant leadership, as measured by the Servant Leadership Questionnaire (SLQ), which was used to examine and measure the servant leader characteristics of faculty chairs. The five subscales used in the SLQ are altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Teacher empowerment is one of two criterion variables used in this research. According to Short and Rinehart (1992), teacher empowerment can be identified using the six characteristics found in the School Participation Empowerment Scale (SPES): decision making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact. The second

criterion variable examines human flourishing as measured by the Flourishing at Work Scale-Short Form (FWS-SF), which was developed by Rautenbach and Rothmann (2017) and focuses on three areas of importance: emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being.

INSTRUMENTS

The three validated psychometric instruments that were chosen for this study (SLQ, SPES, and FWS-SF) align with the research questions because they measure faculty perceptions of the variables. The SLQ was used to measure faculty perceptions of servant leader attributes of their faculty chair. Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) used the 11 key dimensions of servant leadership (altruistic calling, listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and community building) to operationally measure servant leadership. The SLQ includes the five continuously scaled factors of altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, wisdom, and organizational stewardship, and it has been used in empirical research conducted by Hammond (2018), Hashim et al. (2019), Mahembe and Engelbrecht (2014), Page and Grooms (2020), Sahawneh and Benuto (2018), Sparks (2018), and van der Hoven et al. (2021).

Faculty perceptions of their own self-empowerment were measured using the SPES as based on the six themes identified by Short and Rinehart (1992), which were revealed using exploratory factor analysis. The six continuously scaled themes of the SPES are decision making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact (1992). The SPES has been used in recent research to measure teacher empowerment, including studies conducted by Hammond (2018), Oo and Myint (2020), Pinchevsky and Bogler (2014), Salisu (2021), Snodgrass Rangel et al. (2020), Yu and Kim (2021), and Yusoff et al. (2020).

The FWS-SF was used to measure faculty perceptions of flourishing at work based on the themes operationalized by Rautenbach and Rothmann (2017) and Rothmann et al. (2019). The three dimensions of the FWS-SF are emotional well-being (satisfaction with job, positive effect, negative effect), psychological well-being (autonomy satisfaction, competence satisfaction,

relatedness satisfaction, engagement, learning, meaning, purpose), and social well-being (social acceptance, social actualization [growth], social contribution, social coherence, and social integration). The FWS-SF has been used in several empirical studies including those conducted by van Rensburg et al. (2017), who investigated the relationship between flourishing, supervisor support, and intention to leave, and Redelinghuys et al. (2019), who did a similar study on the role of positive organizational practices in flourishing at work. Rautenbach and Rothmann (2017) also conducted a study using this instrument to investigate the antecedents of flourishing at work in a fast-moving consumer goods company.

STUDY SAMPLE

All full-time faculty at the chosen university were invited to participate in the study. The accessible population included 500 faculty from a private university located in the Southwestern United States. Full-time faculty taught in either traditional or online modalities. The survey was delivered electronically using an online survey platform. There were 102 faculty that accessed the survey of which 80 faculty completed the survey. A participant information section was included in the survey to garner a better understanding of the sample. Questions on the following were included in the participant information section: gender, years in current full-time teaching position, years worked at the university, and modality most reflective of full-time teaching position. The key characteristics of the sample were identified using descriptive statistics. Study participants included 52 females (65%) and 28 males (35%). More than 52 of participants (65%) reported 5 or more years in their current position, with 55% of the sample, or 44 participants, indicating between 5 and 10 years in their current position. The average number of years of service at the university was 8 years, and 51 faculty, 63.7% of the sample, reported that their modality was online and 29 (36.3%) reported their modality as traditional.

RESULTS

The data were first cleaned and screened, and the assessment of assumptions included normality of distribution. The IBM SPSS computer program was used to complete the data analysis and the assumptions were met. Multiple correlations were

used to evaluate the strength, direction, and significance of the variables Servant Leadership (as measured by the SLQ), Self-empowerment (as measured by the SPES), and Flourishing (as measured by the FWS-SF) so that all potential relationships could be reviewed at one time.

The findings will be reported in three sections. It is important to note the strength of all three correlations completed in the analysis fell within the moderate (± 0.30 to ± 0.5) range according to Cohen (1988, 1992). The first analysis involved the entire sample $N = 80$. In the second and third sections, correlations will be presented based on the individual faculty modality groups: FTF and OFTF.

Section 1: Faculty Sample ($N=80$)

Correlations were first computed among three variables of Servant Leadership (as measured by the SLQ), Self-empowerment (as measured by the SPES), and Flourishing (as measured by the FWS-SF) for the total sample of 80 faculty. The results suggest that all correlations were statistically significant at the .01 level and greater or equal to $+0.40$, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations on FWS, SPES, and SLQ

		FWS Total	SPES Total	SLQ Total
FWS	Pearson Correlation	1	.488**	.494**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
SPES	Pearson Correlation	.488**	1	.401**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
SLQ	Pearson Correlation	.494**	.401**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

b. Listwise $N=80$

Section 2: FTF Sample ($N=29$)

Correlations were then computed among the three variables for FTF. As shown in Table 2, the results suggest that all correlations were statistically significant at the .01 level and greater or equal to $+0.48$ with the exception of Self-empowerment (SPES), which was not significantly correlated

with servant leadership.

Table 2. FTF Correlations on FWS, SPES, and SLQ

		SLQ Total	SPES Total	FWS Total
SLQ	Pearson Correlation	1	.257	.602**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.178	.001
	N	29	29	29
SPES	Pearson Correlation	.257	1	.478**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.178		.009
	N	29	29	29
FWS	Pearson Correlation	.602**	.478**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.009	
	N	29	29	29

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Section 3: OFTF Faculty Sample ($N=51$)

Finally, correlations were computed among three variables for the OFTF. The results suggest that all correlations were statistically significant at the .01 level and greater or equal to $+0.49$, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. OFTF Correlations on FWS, SPES, and SLQ

		SLQ Total	SPES Total	FWS Total
SLQ	Pearson Correlation	1	.461**	.437**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.001
	N	51	51	51
SPES	Pearson Correlation	.461**	1	.492**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		.000
	N	51	51	51
FWS	Pearson Correlation	.437**	.492**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	
	N	51	51	51

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

Building on Greenleaf's (1970) servant leadership model, this study aimed to identify the

strength, direction, and significance of the relationships between servant leadership, faculty self-empowerment, and faculty flourishing during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The results illuminate relationships between faculty perceptions of a servant leader faculty chair as being related to higher faculty self-empowerment and faculty flourishing during the ongoing pandemic. That, however, is not the most significant finding. In fact, the most compelling finding was the noticeable difference in perceived faculty empowerment when the correlations were completed individually by modality.

The first analysis included the entire sample of combined OETF and FTF. Correlations revealed significant positive relationships among all variables, meaning that faculty in this study experienced a high level of self-empowerment and flourishing with a servant leader as faculty chair.

The second analysis considered the FTF and revealed slightly, but not significantly, lower strength in the relationships among all variables with no significant relationship between the SLQ (faculty chair servant leadership) and SPES (faculty self-empowerment) and a significantly positive relationship between the SLQ and the FWS-SF (faculty flourishing). This means that the FTF surveyed in this study did not experience significant levels of self-empowerment with a servant leader faculty chair but did realize a significant level of flourishing with a servant leader faculty chair.

The third analysis focused on the OETF and revealed all significant relationships, meaning that the OETF in this study experienced a high level of self-empowerment and flourishing with a servant leader faculty chair during the pandemic. This leads us to examine what is different between the FTF role and the OETF role since servant leadership is correlated differently for FTF than OETF. This may mean that servant leadership may be even more important in an online context than it is in the traditional context. Perhaps this means that FTF get empowered from somewhere else but not through their faculty chair.

The OETF role requires regular communication with the faculty chair creating more potential opportunities for OETF to be impacted by servant leadership characteristics. The established connection between OETF and their faculty chair

pre-pandemic laid the groundwork for a perceived smoother transition once the COVID-19 pandemic began. The OETF were already familiar with successful communication strategies when working with the faculty chair, and similarly, the students were also familiar with the online context, which reduced the impact of the crisis situation. Notably, the faculty chair role was amplified during the pandemic, as was the role of all faculty. Students were looking to faculty for stability, guidance, and understanding during the crisis while faculty looked to their faculty chair for direction and proper methods for traversing the pandemic successfully. In lieu of the research results, it is important to consider that self-empowerment for OETF reveals that while OETF are empowered from servant leader faculty chairs, during a crisis FTF are potentially impacted by external factors such as physical proximity to their students and in-person communication with other faculty members.

Limitations

This study was conducted during the pandemic and there may be other variables outside the scope of the study that impacted faculty self-empowerment and their level of flourishing. For example, the OETF were already used to working from home on some days of the week so in some ways they may have had very little adjustment in the new set-up. The faculty chairs of the OETF were also used to leading their faculty in a work from home set-up so they could be better equipped to establish a rapport, build relationships, and communicate through online modalities.

On the other hand, the FTF were used to a different work set-up and may have had a bigger adjustment to work from home to deliver online teaching for remote learning. If they are more independent from their faculty chairs or if they have other sources where they draw their self-empowerment and level of flourishing from, such as other colleagues that they are more comfortable reaching out to, that is not covered in this study. In the same way, the faculty chairs of FTF members had to adjust to online modalities of communication and leadership during the pandemic, but this probability is also not covered in the data collected.

Lastly, the data results are based on self-reported perception about servant leadership, self-empowerment, and flourishing. Simon and Goes (2013)

discuss the potential for bias on self-reported perceptions in survey instruments. The extent of the potential bias is not covered in this study.

Future Research

The following opportunities for future research have been identified related to the servant leadership construct and faculty self-empowerment and faculty flourishing. First, a qualitative or mixed methods design could be used to further examine the relationship between variables through interviews and observation. This information could provide deeper insight and meaning related to faculty perceptions of their faculty chair as a servant leader and their own self-empowerment and flourishing.

Second, future research should consider the ratio of faculty respondents. The number of faculty that responded within the sampled university was disproportionate with nearly two-thirds of the sample representing the OFTF modality and roughly one-third representing the FTF modality. This difference could influence the findings if the modality representation was more proportionate.

Third, opportunities for future research exist that may examine the role of faculty ability to be empowered and flourish based on faculty-student interaction, along with faculty-faculty relationships. Although OFTF-OFTF and OFTF-FTF relationships may also be considered in the context of empowerment for future research opportunities, empowerment originating from FTF-FTF relationships may differ from OFTF-OFTF and OFTF-FTF due to physical proximity and face-to-face encounters.

Fourth, servant leadership was not strongly correlated to teacher perceptions of their own self-empowerment for the FTF. Future research could further examine why this relationship differs. For example, qualitative methodology could be employed using interviews to explore what is different between the OFTF role and the FTF role and how these differences influence faculty perceptions. Doing so may also underscore how and why OFTF faculty appear to rely on the leadership of their faculty chair for empowerment, where the FTF do not.

Fifth, it is possible that the FTF group, through their face-to-face interaction with students and their faculty peers, have the opportunity to practice servant leadership and may as a result be empowered

and flourish separate from the influence of the servant leadership of their faculty chair. Future research would need to explore these thoughts further. Finally, it is recommended that future research examine these constructs in other national cultures and geographic locations. Engaging in comparisons across cultures may further illuminate how servant leadership can contribute to faculty self-empowerment and flourishing.

Implications

The existing research indicates that flourishing at work is impacted through interventions focused on emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being (Rothmann et al., 2019). To encourage flourishing, educators may be supported through the positive practices of kindness and compassion while being firmly established in an environment that encourages forgiveness, inspiration, mutual respect, and appreciation (Redelinguys et al., 2019). Faculty that are experiencing low self-empowerment may benefit from a servant-leader structure given the predictive association of SLQ emotional healing and empowerment (Hammond, 2018).

The practical implications of the research findings show the possibility for improved OFTF self-empowerment under the leadership of OFTF faculty chairs who embrace servant-leadership characteristics. In contrast, FTF are not significantly empowered by their faculty chairs, leading to the directive that an emphasis should be placed on self-empowerment for OFTF but not FTF. Notably, faculty flourishing is significantly linked to faculty-chair servant leadership in both modalities. This demonstrates the value of faculty chairs who embrace servant leadership characteristics in a university setting.

Recommendations

The results of the study highlight an opportunity for several recommendations of future practice that may lead to improved universities with empowered and flourishing faculty resulting from faculty-chair servant leadership. The research findings may provide the building blocks within a university setting for faculty-chair leadership development leading to the development of more empowered faculty. Additionally, the findings provide a foundation for further exploration related to the impact of servant leadership in various other facets within a university setting that may increase

the flourishing among faculty.

A more in-depth application of the findings lends itself to the adaptation of servant-leadership training curriculum in professional development opportunities presented to faculty and faculty chairs. The discovery of new knowledge resulting from the research findings illustrates the positive relationships between faculty empowerment and faculty-chair servant leadership and how changes to the onboarding or new hire training process could be influenced in the future. Lastly, the selection and hiring processes of faculty chairs may be adjusted to search out candidates that embody servant-leader characteristics. Due to the ongoing need for qualified faculty who are able to flourish both online and in person, the research findings suggest that the recruitment and retention of faculty may also be influenced through the servant-leadership and faculty-empowerment results of this study.

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