

# Servant Leadership and Organizational Commitment:

## Empirical Findings and Workplace Implications

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Servant Leadership Research Roundtable – August 2004

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A report on a quantitative study of servant leadership and other organizational constructs is the focus of this paper. Organizational commitment was measured with the Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993) commitment scales. Perceptions of servant leadership and job satisfaction were measured with the Organizational Leadership Assessment (Laub, 1999). Pearson correlation tests found a statistically significant and positive relationship between job satisfaction and servant leadership. However, contrary to what the literature indicated, organizational commitment and servant leadership had a statistically significant inverse relationship. ANOVA tests and post hoc analysis of categorical data found hourly workers differing most from faculty in their perceptions of servant leadership and organizational commitment. A non-traditional college was the research site for this quantitative study.

Testing the emerging theory of servant leadership with other organizational constructs was the purpose of the research summarized in this paper. Since two other organizational constructs, job satisfaction and organizational commitment, were consistently found to be positively correlated with each other in the literature (Bateman & Strasser, 1984; Brooke, Russell, & Price, 1988; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990) and even causally related (Brown & Gaylor, 2002; Curry, Wakefield, Price, & Mueller, 1986; Farkas & Tetrick, 1989; Lance, 1991; Vandenberg & Lance, 1992; Williams & Hazer, 1986), this study sought to compare servant leadership with each of them, in order to further the research stream regarding servant leadership.

Empirical research on servant leadership has been scarce, however, Bass (2000) labeled servant leadership a movement. Other popular leadership writers such as Blanchard (2002), Covey (2002), DePree (1995), and Senge (1997) have either anecdotally or prophetically referenced the idea that servant leadership should be considered by the leaders of today's organizations. Therefore, this study sought to provide further understanding of servant leadership behavior for today's organizations. Servant leadership was measured with an understanding of a way of leading that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. Such a mindset results in these behaviors: valuing people, developing people, building community, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, and sharing leadership (Laub, 1999, p. 83).

Job satisfaction was automatically measured along with servant leadership by the Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA) tool used in the study. Job satisfaction has been positively linked with job performance, especially in high complexity jobs (Judge, Bono, Thoresen, & Patton, 2001), and is important to the leaders and managers who are concerned with output in their organizations.

Organizational commitment was added to the survey because it had not been compared with servant leadership before, yet had numerous studies linking it with job satisfaction. For example, in a meta-analysis of organizational commitment, Mathieu and Zajac (1990) found two significantly consistent correlates for commitment: intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction. Employee commitment was also found to be positively correlated with organizational performance (Benkhoff, 1997), a variable of high interest to organizational leaders.

The findings in this paper demonstrated that servant leadership can be measured in a workplace setting, is perceived differently by employee levels in the organization, and correlates differently with two other organizational constructs. Implications as to why organizational commitment demonstrated an inverse correlation with servant leadership are discussed in particular, since these two constructs had not been compared previously and yielded results in this study contrary to what was indicated in the literature.

## Method

The research design tested three null hypotheses: (a) no *difference* between categories of employees in their perception of servant leadership, (b) no *correlation* between servant leadership and job satisfaction, and (c) no *correlation* between servant leadership and organizational commitment. In order to gather the data to measure three organizational phenomena at the same time, the study used validated instruments with four levels of employees in a workplace setting. The four levels were top leadership, managers/supervisors, faculty, and hourly workers. A six-page questionnaire that combined Laub's OLA (1999) and Meyer et al.'s (1993) organizational commitment scales was sent in a self-mailer and returned anonymously to the researcher. The term servant or servant leadership was not used in the data gathering, so bias would not be introduced in the sample. A total of 170 employees participated, showing a 76% response rate. A non-traditional college was the study site.

## Findings and Discussion

An analysis of the data collection for this study was determined in two ways. First, by ANOVA tests for the *difference* in perception of servant leadership across the organization, and second by Pearson correlation tests for the *relationship* between the organizational constructs measured in this study: servant leadership, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

An ANOVA test demonstrated a statistically significant difference in employee perceptions of servant leadership in this organization  $F(3,164) = 3.085, p = .029$ .

*Table 1*  
*Perceptions of Servant Leadership by Employee Level*

	Top Leaders	Mgmt/ Salaried	FT Faculty	Hourly Workers	All Participants
Means	241.30	223.52	239.55	219.03	224.65
Std.	29.97	33.50	39.88	32.05	34.18
ANOVA Summary	Sum of Sq	df	Mean Sq	F-statistic	Sig.
Between groups	10423.99	3	3474.66	3.085	.029
Within groups	184739.79	164	1126.46		
Total	195163.79	164			

A Bonferroni post hoc test showed hourly employees differed most with faculty (.067 sig.). Therefore, this study demonstrated that servant leadership behavior can be measured in a workplace setting, and that there is a statistically significant difference between employees at various positions and roles in the organization in their perceptions of servant leadership across the organization. This difference replicates the findings of most multi-level ratings of employee perceptions about leadership in general, that is, most leaders and managers rate themselves higher in positive qualities than their subordinates do (Kouzes & Posner, 1997).

The post hoc test that indicated where the difference is the greatest showed that hourly workers and faculty are experiencing the organization very differently. The hourly workers were geographically distant from the “customers” or the students, versus the faculty who are with students on a continual basis. Additionally, hourly workers may not feel as valued as faculty, because of a workplace setting that frequently highlights scholarship and academic degrees of the faculty, as well as the managers and top leaders.

Next, the relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction, and servant leadership and organizational commitment was examined. A series of Pearson correlation tests were conducted with the data measuring the three organizational constructs. Table 2 shows a substantial positive correlation between servant leadership and job satisfaction,  $r(168) = +.631, p = .000$ , two tailed.

Table 2  
*Servant Leadership and Job Satisfaction*

	SL	JS
Pearson correlation	1	.631
Sig. (2 tailed)		.000
N	168	168

This finding also validated the work of Girard (2000) and Thompson (2003) who found a positive correlation between servant leadership and job satisfaction among the leaders and salaried levels in their respective organizational samplings. However, this study extends their research to include data from hourly workers, thereby demonstrating that job satisfaction is a correlate of servant leadership for all levels of workers in the organization.

Table 3 shows a statistically significant and inverse correlation between servant leadership and organizational commitment,  $r(168) = -.223, p = .004$ , two tailed. This finding was contrary to what previous research indicated might be demonstrated in this study. So far in the literature, job satisfaction and organizational commitment have been consistently correlated (both positively and causally), and job satisfaction and servant leadership have been positively correlated. Yet, in this study, servant leadership did not have a positive relationship with organizational commitment, but instead was inversely correlated.

Table 3  
*Servant Leadership and Organizational Commitment*

	SL	OC
Pearson correlation	1	-.223
Sig. (2 tailed)		.004
N	168	168

The researcher also ran an ANOVA on the overall commitment scores using the four employee levels. Table 4 shows there is a statistically significant difference between groups in the commitment scores,  $F(3, 167) = 5.427, p = .001$ . Bonferroni post hoc results indicated the greatest differences are between hourly workers and faculty (.028 sig.) and between hourly and management (.005 sig.).

Table 4  
*Organizational Commitment by Employee Level*

	Top Leaders	Mgmt/ Salaried	FT Faculty	Hourly Workers	All Participants
Means	44.20	44.63	43.82	49.30	46.61

Std.	6.25	8.69	8.96	7.00	8.18
ANOVA Summary	Sum of Sq	df	Mean Sq	F-statistic	Sig.
Between groups	1009.634	3	336.545	5.427	.001
Within groups	10170.438	164	62.015		
Total	11180.071	167			

Thus, the hourly workers' greater level of commitment versus a significantly different level of commitment among faculty and management needs explanation. It may be explained in terms of tenure (length of employment), a variable which has been found to have a statistically significant positive relationship with organizational commitment (Colbert & Kwon, 2000; Curry et al., 1986; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Yet the organization in this study does not have tenured faculty positions, and also has hired 40 of the 225 employees in the last year to keep up with the institution's growth. Another influence on negative correlation between servant leadership and organizational commitment may be other organizational characteristics such as restructuring—found to be significantly and negatively related to organizational commitment (Probst, 2003). Various kinds of restructuring were in process at this institution. Since organizational commitment includes the employee's need to stay in the organization, these results may also be explained by education level and pay. Faculty and management have more job options because of their required educational level, and may therefore be more open to leaving the organization for other jobs that offer greater opportunities. Conversely, hourly workers would have fewer options because they typically have less pay, potentially less savings to cover personal life situations, and less formal education than the masters and doctorate required in most management and all faculty and top leadership positions in the college that was surveyed.

#### Limitations and Workplace Implications

Though limited by data collected in one study site, this field survey not only provided empirical data on differing perceptions of servant leadership, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, but also found differing relationships between organizational phenomena that had not been compared before in the organizational leadership literature. Inferences for this organization became quite evident, as well as implications for further study that compares servant leadership and organizational commitment in particular.

The findings indicate that the significantly lower perception of servant leadership as measured by hourly workers could be partially addressed through the budget process, that is, more training and development funding for hourly workers. In a college setting, faculty have a rank improvement process, conference budgets, and scholarship incentives that demonstrate a commitment to developing the individual employee. Hourly workers need similar attention and leadership value that focuses on employee development at all levels. The servant leadership component of shared leadership is another likely disparity in a college setting, because of the shared governance structures that exist in higher educational institutions. Hourly workers, however, could be afforded more opportunity for input on decisions that affect the administration of the institution and made aware of the shared influence they may already have in each department.

The results that showed servant leadership and job satisfaction are significantly and positively correlated was predicted by Laub (1999) who developed of the servant leadership scale (OLA) used in this study. Employees liked their jobs and immediate surroundings, to the same extent statistically that they perceived servant leadership behavior in the organization. Since faculty scored the highest in their perceptions of servant leader behavior and job satisfaction and hourly workers the lowest in each, more attention is needed with hourly workers regarding feelings of being valued and developed, and in satisfaction with their immediate surroundings and job experiences.

The findings on organizational commitment indicate an area where employees are perceiving the organization differently than the other two variables. It may be possible that those who have been with the organization longer (often measured as commitment) may perceive less servant leader behavior because they know the faults of the leaders better. It may also be that if leaders support the faculty becoming increasingly committed to their discipline or if technical workers receive additional training for further skill at their trade that it increasingly doesn't matter where they practice their work. If so, this would result in lower employee commitment measures for their current organization. Likewise, this study's inverse correlation may indicate

that servant leaders create a climate of growth in the individual that leads to self-efficacy beliefs such as, “I am pretty good at this work and have developed so much that I’m now capable of brokering my abilities elsewhere.” If this is so, employees in servant-led organizations may become more committed to their individual job, but less so to the organization. As leaders become aware of this, should they shrink back from servant leadership mindset with employees? Perhaps servant leaders need to view the variable of organizational commitment in new light. For example, the concept of employee turnover is at the basis of what most organizational commitment scales measure, however, staying in a job because an employee needs to stay may not lead to the best job performance, and employee turnover is not all bad, that is, growing organizations need new employees and may be willing to lose uncommitted and unwilling-to-be-developed followers. All leaders need to recognize that it takes times until new workers gain a sense of belonging in the organization. Servant leaders should initiate structures that help the workers gain a sense of “family” with fellow employees while highlighting the organizational mission.

In light of the findings of this study, some measure of servant leader behavior in the organization may not automatically result in greater commitment by the employees to the organization. However, an emphasis on teamwork (building community) and shared leadership, along with valuing and developing the individual, is the recommended approach.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

A replication study should be conducted with several types of organizations to test the reliability of the servant leadership and organizational commitment inverse relationship in this research. Another survey with the same instruments in a university context could test the reliability of the organizational commitment findings in this study site. Also, a study using different scales—especially for organizational commitment—should be used to test the results in this study and to further test the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment. Such information would enhance the research stream for the emerging theory of servant leadership as well as inform organizational leaders about employee perceptions of these variables.

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**EXHIBIT A**

*Operational Definition of Servant Leadership*

**Servant Leadership is...**

An understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. Servant leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led, and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization, and those served by the organization.

**The Servant Leader...**

Values People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By believing in people</li> <li>• By serving other’s needs before his or her own</li> <li>• By receptive, non-judgmental listening</li> </ul>
Develops People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By providing opportunities for learning and growth</li> <li>• By modeling appropriate behavior</li> <li>• By building up others through encouragement and affirmation</li> </ul>
Builds Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By building strong personal relationships</li> <li>• By working collaboratively with others</li> <li>• By valuing differences of others</li> </ul>
Displays Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By being open and accountable to others</li> <li>• By a willingness to learn from others</li> <li>• By maintaining integrity and trust</li> </ul>
Provides Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By envisioning the future</li> <li>• By taking initiative</li> <li>• By clarifying goals</li> </ul>
Shares Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By facilitating a shared vision</li> <li>• By sharing power and releasing control</li> <li>• By sharing status and promoting others</li> </ul>

Laub, J. A. (1999). *Assessing the servant organization: Development of the organizational leadership assessment (OLA) instrument*. Unpublished Dissertation, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL.

**Exhibit B****AN ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT**

This questionnaire is designed to be taken by employees at all levels of the AGS organization. As you respond to the different statements, please answer as to what you believe is generally true about the Adult & Graduate Studies organization. Please respond...

- with your own personal feelings and beliefs.
- not with the beliefs of others, or those that others would want you to have.
- to how things *are* ... not as they could be, or should be.

There are five (5) different sections in this questionnaire.

- **Note that each section has different instructions.**
- Feel free to use the full spectrum of answers (from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).
- If you are uncertain, answer with your first, intuitive response.
- It takes about 20 minutes to complete all 78 items.
- **By completing all 5 sections, your questionnaire can be used in determining the results.**

**Your involvement in this assessment is completely anonymous.** Return the survey by folding the questionnaire in half so the back page shows the return address. Tape or staple it, and send via IWU Campus Mail. Thank you!

Sharon Drury

**Please return by January 16, 2004**

**Section 1**

Please place an **X** on **ONE** of the lines below to indicate **your** position/role in the organization:

\_\_\_ Top leadership (VP administrative council)

- \_\_\_ Management (directors, assistant directors, managers, and supervisors of one or more persons)
- \_\_\_ Faculty (full-time teaching position)
- \_\_\_ Workforce (hourly employees, e.g., coordinators, specialists, support staff, technical workers)

**Section 2**

In this next section, please respond to each statement as you believe it applies to the **entire organization**, including workforce, faculty, managers, and top leadership.

Please provide your response to each statement by placing an **X** in one of the boxes after each statement.

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>In general, people within this organization ....</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1 Trust each other					
2 Are clear on the key goals of the organization					
3 Are non-judgmental - they keep an open mind					
4 Respect each other					
5 Know where this organization is headed in the future					
6 Maintain high ethical standards					
7 Work well together in teams					
8 Value differences in culture, race & ethnicity					
9 Are caring & compassionate towards each other					
10 Demonstrate high integrity & honesty					
11 Are trustworthy					
12 Relate well to each other					
13 Attempt to work with others more than working on their own					
14 Are held accountable for reaching work goals					
15 Are aware of the needs of others					
16 Allow for individuality of style and expression					
17 Are encouraged by supervisors to share in making <i>important</i> decisions					
18 Work to maintain positive working relationships					
19 Accept people as they are					
20 View conflict as an opportunity to learn & grow					
21 Know how to get along with people					

**Section 3**

In this next section, please respond to each statement as you believe it applies to the **leadership** of the organization, including **managers/supervisors and top leadership**.

Please provide your response to each statement by placing an **X** in one of the boxes after each statement.

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Managers/Supervisors and Top Leadership in this Organization...</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
22 Communicate a clear vision of the future of the organization					
23 Are open to learning from those who are <i>below</i> them in the organization					
24 Allow workers to help determine where this organization is headed					
25 Work alongside the workers instead of separate from them					
26 Use persuasion to influence others instead of coercion or force					
27 Don't hesitate to provide the leadership that is needed					
28 Promote open communication and sharing of information					
29 Give workers the power to make <i>important</i> decisions					
30 Provide support and resources needed to help workers meet their goals					
31 Create an environment that encourages learning					
32 Are open to receiving criticism & challenge from others					
33 Say what they mean, and mean what they say					
34 Encourage each person to exercise leadership					
35 Admit personal limitations & mistakes					
36 Encourage people to take risks even if they may fail					
37 Practice the same behavior they expect from others					
38 Facilitate the building of community & team					
39 Do not demand special recognition for being leaders					
40 Lead by example by modeling appropriate behavior					
41 Seek to influence others from a positive relationship rather than from the authority of their position					
42 Provide opportunities for all workers to develop to their full potential					
43 Honestly evaluate themselves before seeking to evaluate others					
44 Use their power and authority to benefit the workers					

45 Take appropriate action when it is needed					
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**Section 3, continued**

Provide your response to each statement by placing an **X** in one of the boxes

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Managers/Supervisors and Top Leadership in this Organization...</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
46 Build people up through encouragement and affirmation					
47 Encourage workers to work <i>together</i> rather than competing against each other					
48 Are humble – they do not promote themselves					
49 Communicate clear plans & goals for the organization					
50 Provide mentor relationships in order to help people grow professionally					
51 Are accountable & responsible to others					
52 Are receptive listeners					
53 Do not seek after special status or the “perks” of leadership					
54 Put the needs of the workers ahead of their own					

**Section 4**

In this next section, please respond to each statement as you believe it is true about **you personally and your role** in the organization.

<b>In viewing my own role...</b>	1	2	3	4	5
55 I feel appreciated by my supervisor for what I contribute					
56 I am working at a high level of productivity					
57 I am listened to by those <i>above</i> me in the organization					
58 I feel good about my contribution to the organization					
59 I receive encouragement and affirmation from those <i>above</i> me in the organization					
60 My job is important to the success of this organization					
61 I trust the leadership of this organization					
62 I enjoy working in this organization					
63 I am respected by those <i>above</i> me in the organization					
64 I am able to be creative in my job					

65	In this organization, a person’s <i>work</i> is valued more than their <i>title</i>						
66	I am able to use my best gifts and abilities in my job						

**Section 5**

This section is different because it has a 7-point scale. Please place an X in one of the seven boxes after each statement as you believe it applies to **you personally in this organization.**

Read each statement carefully.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
For me personally in this organization...		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Equally Agree and Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
67	I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.							
68	Right now, staying with my organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire.							
69	I feel as if this organization’s problems are my own.							
70	It would be very hard for me to leave my organization right now, even if I wanted to.							
71	I do not feel a strong sense of “belonging” to my organization.							
72	Too much of my life would be disrupted if I decided I wanted to leave my organization now.							
73	One of the few negatives consequences of leaving this organization would be the scarcity of available alternatives.							
74	I do not feel “emotionally attached” to this organization.							
75	I feel I have too few options to consider leaving this organization.							
76	I do not feel like “part of the family” at my organization.							
77	If I had not already put so much of myself into this organization, I might consider working elsewhere.							
78	This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.							

**Return this survey anonymously** by folding the questionnaire in half so the back page shows the return address. Tape or staple it, and send via IWU Campus Mail. Thank you!

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