



# Transformational versus servant leadership: a difference in leader focus

Transformational  
versus servant  
leadership

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A. Gregory Stone

*Graduate School of Business, Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA*

Robert F. Russell

*Department of Business Administration, Emory and Henry College, Emory,  
Virginia, USA, and*

Kathleen Patterson

*School of Leadership Studies, Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA*

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**Abstract** This article examines transformational leadership and servant leadership to determine what similarities and differences exist between the two leadership concepts. The authors posit that the primary difference between transformational leadership and servant leadership is the focus of the leader. The transformational leader's focus is directed toward the organization, and his or her behavior builds follower commitment toward organizational objectives, while the servant leader's focus is on the followers, and the achievement of organizational objectives is a subordinate outcome. The extent to which the leader is able to shift the primary focus of leadership from the organization to the follower is the distinguishing factor in classifying leaders as either transformational or servant leaders. This article also looks at the next stage of developmental issues in servant leadership, such as the challenges facing empirical investigation and measurement, and the changes that are occurring in current thinking about the servant leadership approach. Ultimately, the case is made that although different, both transformational leadership and servant leadership offer the conceptual framework for dynamic leadership.

## Transformational versus servant leadership – a difference in leader focus

Transformational leadership, initiated by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and Bernard M. Bass (1985a), has become a very popular concept in recent years. Both researchers and practitioners have gravitated to the theory and have employed it in a variety of organizational settings. Similarly, the concept of servant leadership, which Robert Greenleaf (1977) formulated in the modern era, has received substantial attention in the contemporary leadership field. A cursory glimpse of transformational leadership and servant leadership leaves the perception that the concepts are rather similar. In fact, some individuals question whether there is any real difference between the concepts.

This article first examines the theoretical framework, characteristics, and focus of both transformational leadership and servant leadership to determine what similarities and differences exist between the two leadership concepts. Thereafter, the article differentiates the concepts along the dimension of leader focus. The primary premise of the article is that transformational leaders tend to focus more on organizational objectives while servant leaders focus more on the people who are their followers. This tendency of the servant leader to focus on followers appears to be the primary factor that distinguishes servant leadership from transformational leadership. Otherwise,



there are many similarities between the two leadership concepts. A clear understanding of both frameworks helps to reveal the many similarities and the aforementioned distinction.

### **Transformational leadership**

Bass and Avolio (Bass, 1985a; Bass and Avolio, 1990) developed Burns' (1978) ideas and posited the formal concept of transformational leadership. Their work built not only upon the contribution of Burns but also those made by Bennis and Nanus (1985), Tichy and Devanna (1986), and others. Bass (1990b) specified that transformational leadership: "occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group" (p. 21). Bass (1990a) stipulates that this transcending beyond self-interest is for the "group, organization, or society" (p. 53). In essence, transformational leadership is a process of building commitment to organizational objectives and then empowering followers to accomplish those objectives (Yukl, 1998). The result, at least in theory, is enhanced follower performance (Burns, 1998; Yukl, 1998).

Burns (1978) considered leaders to be either transformational or transactional, while others view leadership as a continuum with transactional leadership at one end and transformational leadership at the other. Bass (1990a) said that transactional leadership occurs when leaders "exchange promises of rewards and benefits to subordinates for the subordinates' fulfillment of agreements with the leader" (p. 53). The transactional leader, according to Daft (2002), recognizes followers' needs and then defines the exchange process for meeting those needs. Both the leader and the follower benefit from the exchange transaction. Transactional leadership is based on bureaucratic authority, focuses on task completion, and relies on rewards and punishments (Tracey and Hinkin, 1998).

Transformational leadership differs substantially from transactional leadership. It is concerned more about progress and development. Furthermore, transformational leadership enhances the effects of transactional leadership on followers (Bass, 1985b, 1990a).

Transformational leaders transform the personal values of followers to support the vision and goals of the organization by fostering an environment where relationships can be formed and by establishing a climate of trust in which visions can be shared (Bass, 1985a). Avolio *et al.* (1991) established four primary behaviors that constitute transformational leadership:

- (1) Idealized influence (or charismatic influence).
- (2) Inspirational motivation.
- (3) Intellectual stimulation.
- (4) Individualized consideration.

The following discussion summarizes these areas and identifies the characteristics that accompany each of them.

#### *Idealized influence*

Idealized influence is the charismatic element of transformational leadership in which leaders become role models who are admired, respected, and emulated by followers

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(Avolio and Bass, 2002; Bass, 1998; Bass and Avolio, 1994). Consequently, followers demonstrate a high degree of trust in such leaders (Bass, 1990b; Jung and Avolio, 2000). Idealized influence in leadership also involves integrity in the form of ethical and moral conduct (Tracey and Hinkin, 1998).

The development of a shared vision is an integral component of the idealized, transformational leader's role (Jung and Avolio, 2000). It helps others to look at the futuristic state, while inspiring acceptance through the alignment of personal values and interests to the collective interests of the group's purposes (Avolio and Bass, 2002; Bass, 1990b, 1998; Jung and Avolio, 2000). Transformational leaders are also willing to take and share risks with followers (Avolio and Bass, 2002; Bass, 1998).

#### *Inspirational motivation*

Transformational leaders inspire and motivate others by "providing meaning and challenge to their followers' work" (Avolio and Bass, 2002, p. 2). The spirit of the team is "aroused" while "enthusiasm and optimism are displayed" (Bass, 1998, p. 5). The transformational leader builds relationships with followers through interactive communication, which forms a cultural bond between the two participants and leads to a shifting of values by both parties toward common ground. The leader inspires followers to see the attractive future state, while communicating expectations and demonstrating a commitment to goals and a shared vision. Idealized influence and inspirational motivation are usually combined to form charismatic-inspirational leadership (Bass, 1998).

#### *Intellectual stimulation*

Transformational leaders stimulate their followers' efforts "to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways" (Avolio and Bass, 2002, p. 2). Followers' mistakes are not publicly criticized and creativity is openly encouraged. Transformational leaders solicit their followers' ideas and creative solutions to problems, thereby including followers in problem solving. The intellectually stimulating leader encourages followers to try new approaches but emphasizes rationality (Bass, 1990b).

#### *Individualized consideration*

The transformational leader disburses personal attention to followers based on the individual follower's needs for achievement and growth (Avolio and Bass, 2002). To do this, the leader acts as a mentor or coach, developing followers in a supportive climate to "higher levels of potential" (Bass, 1998, p. 6). The considerate leader recognizes and demonstrates acceptance of the followers' individual differences in terms of needs and desires. By doing this, the transformational leader fosters two-way communication through effective listening (Avolio and Bass, 2002; Bass, 1998). The leader develops followers by delegating tasks and then unobtrusively monitoring those tasks – checking to see if additional support or direction is needed. The net effect of individualized consideration and other transformational leadership behaviors is empowerment of followers (Behling and McFillen, 1996).

Ultimately, transformational leaders can develop a very powerful influence over followers. For example, several research studies have documented the power of transformational leadership in establishing value congruency and trust (Jung and

Avolio, 2000; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1996; Podsakoff *et al.*, 1996; Shamir, 1995). Followers respect and trust transformational leaders, so they conform their values to those of the leaders and yield power to them.

In summary, the transformational leader articulates the vision in a clear and appealing manner, explains how to attain the vision, acts confidently and optimistically, expresses confidence in the followers, emphasizes values with symbolic actions, leads by example, and empowers followers to achieve the vision (Yukl, 2002). Table I summarizes the four primary or functional areas of transformational leadership and identifies the attributes that, according to the literature, accompany these primary characteristics.

**Servant leadership**

Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990) is credited with initiating the servant leadership concept among modern organizational theorists (Spears, 1995, 1996). In Greenleaf's (1969, 1977) opinion, leadership must primarily meet the needs of others. The focus of servant leadership is on others rather than upon self and on understanding of the role of the leader as a servant (Greenleaf, 1977). Self-interest should not motivate servant leadership; rather, it should ascend to a higher plane of motivation (Greenleaf, 1977; Pollard, 1996). The servant leader's primary objective is to serve and meet the needs of others, which optimally should be the prime motivation for leadership (Russell and Stone, 2002). Servant leaders develop people, helping them to strive and flourish (McMinn, 2001). Servant leaders provide vision, gain credibility and trust from followers, and influence others (Farling *et al.*, 1999).

While servant leadership is an increasingly popular concept, throughout much of its history the concept has been systematically undefined and lacking in empirical support (Farling *et al.*, 1999). In an attempt to give cohesion to the development of a theory, Russell and Stone (2002) established a practical model for servant leadership. They also identified functional and accompanying attributes of servant leadership (see Table II). The attributes identified by Russell and Stone provide a reasonable basis for comparing servant leadership with transformational leadership.

Functional attributes	Accompanying attributes
(1) Idealized influence/charisma	Vision Trust Respect Risk-sharing Integrity Modeling
(2) Inspirational motivation	Commitment to goals Communication Enthusiasm
(3) Intellectual stimulation	Rationality Problem solving
(4) Individualized consideration	Personal attention Mentoring Listening Empowerment

**Table I.**  
Transformational  
leadership attributes

Functional attributes	Accompanying attributes	Transformational versus servant leadership
Vision Honesty, integrity Trust Service Modeling Pioneering  Appreciation of others  Empowerment	Communication Credibility Competence Stewardship Visibility Influence Persuasion Listening Encouragement Teaching Delegation	

**Table II.**  
Servant leadership  
attributes

**Comparative review of transformational and servant leadership**

To help the reader see the similarities and differences between transformational leadership and servant leadership, all of the elements referenced thus far are comparatively reviewed in Table III.

**Similarities and differences**

At this point, one may ask what is the real difference, if any, between transformational leadership and servant leadership? Is servant leadership just a subset of transformational leadership or vice versa? Are transformational leadership and servant leadership the same theory, except for their use of different names?

Transformational leadership attributes	Servant leadership attributes
<i>Idealized (charismatic) influence</i> Vision Trust Respect Risk-sharing Integrity Modeling	Influence <i>Vision</i> <i>Trust</i> Credibility and competence Delegation <i>Honesty and integrity</i> <i>Modeling</i> and visibility <i>Service</i>
<i>Inspirational motivation</i> Commitment to goals Communication Enthusiasm	Stewardship Communication
<i>Intellectual stimulation</i> Rationality Problem solving	Persuasion <i>Pioneering</i>
<i>Individualized consideration</i> Personal attention Mentoring Listening Empowerment	<i>Appreciation of others</i> Encouragement Teaching Listening <i>Empowerment</i>

**Note:** Functional attributes in italic print – accompanying attributes in regular print

**Table III.**  
Comparison of attributes

The side-by-side comparison in Table III reveals that transformational leadership and servant leadership have relatively analogous characteristics. Perhaps this is because both transformational and servant leadership are attempts to define and explain people-oriented leadership styles. According to both concepts, their leadership frameworks incorporate:

- influence;
- vision;
- trust;
- respect or credibility;
- risk-sharing or delegation;
- integrity; and
- modeling.

Both transformational leadership and servant leadership emphasize the importance of appreciating and valuing people, listening, mentoring or teaching, and empowering followers. In fact, the theories are probably most similar in their emphasis upon individualized consideration and appreciation of followers.

Nevertheless, transformational leadership and servant leadership do have points of variation. There is a much greater emphasis upon service to followers in the servant leadership paradigm. Furthermore, while both transformational leaders and servant leaders are influential, servant leaders gain influence in a nontraditional manner that derives from servanthood itself (Russell and Stone, 2002). In so doing, they allow extraordinary freedom for followers to exercise their own abilities. They also place a much higher degree of trust in their followers than would be the case in any leadership style that required the leader to be somewhat directive.

### **The difference**

In response to the questions about whether there are any real differences between transformational leadership and servant leadership, our position is that the concepts hold many similarities, and they are complementary theories in many respects. Nonetheless, they ultimately form a distinctly separate theoretical framework of leadership because of one primary difference. The principal difference between transformational leadership and servant leadership is the focus of the leader. While transformational leaders and servant leaders both show concern for their followers, the overriding focus of the servant leader is upon service to their followers. The transformational leader has a greater concern for getting followers to engage in and support organizational objectives. The extent to which the leader is able to shift the primary focus of his or her leadership from the organization to the follower is the distinguishing factor in determining whether the leader may be a transformational or servant leader. Furthermore, we proffer that this primary distinction influences other characteristics and outcomes, giving rise to secondary differences between the concepts.

### **Leader focus**

With transformational leadership, the leader's focus is directed toward the organization, and his or her behavior builds follower commitment toward the

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organizational objectives through empowering followers to accomplish those objectives (Yukl, 1998). While transactional leaders focus on exchange relations with followers, transformational leaders inspire followers to higher levels of performance for the sake of the organization (Burns, 1998; Yukl, 1998). The very definition of transformational leadership states the building of commitment to the organizational objectives (Yukl, 1998). The primary focus is on the organization, with follower development and empowerment secondary to accomplishing the organizational objectives. The result, nonetheless, is enhanced follower performance (Burns, 1998; Yukl, 1998).

In contrast, the servant leader is one who focuses on his or her followers. Servant leaders do not have particular affinity for the abstract corporation or organization; rather, they value the people who constitute the organization. This is not an emotional endeavor but rather an unconditional concern for the well-being of those who form the entity. This relational context is where the servant leader actually leads. Harvey (2001) states that:

... chasing profits is peripheral; the real point of business is to serve as one of the institutions through which society develops and exercises the capacity for constructive action (pp. 38-39).

The servant leader does not serve with a primary focus on results; rather the servant leader focuses on service itself. Lubin (2001) proffers that the servant leader's first responsibilities are relationships and people, and those relationships take precedence over the task and product. Servant leaders trust their followers to undertake actions that are in the best interest of the organization, even though the leaders do not primarily focus on organizational objectives.

According to Bass (2000), servant leadership is "close to the transformational components of inspiration and individualized consideration" (p. 33). However, the stress of servant leadership is upon the leader's aim to serve. This desire to serve people supersedes organizational objectives. Servant leadership is a belief that organizational goals will be achieved on a long-term basis only by first facilitating the growth, development, and general well-being of the individuals who comprise the organization. Conversely, Bass states that transformational leaders strive to align their own and others' interests with the good of the group, organization, or society. The primary aim is organizational conformance and performance more than it is service to and facilitation of followers. Harvey (2001) contends that the servant leader's primary objective is the workers and their growth, then the customer base, and finally the organizational bottom line.

### **Historical context**

The differences identified heretofore between transformational leadership and servant leadership are logical extensions of some of the primary themes in the leadership literature. Various research studies dating back to the middle part of the twentieth century have identified a task or production dimension and a people or relationship dimension to leadership. The Ohio State University leadership studies (Stogdill and Coons, 1957) identified two primary elements of leadership:

- (1) Initiating structure, which deals with task behavior.
- (2) Consideration for workers, which concerns relationships.



Studies at the University of Michigan (Likert, 1961, 1967) focused on similar concepts. These studies examined the production orientation and employee orientation of leaders. They determined that the most effective leaders incorporate both dimensions but pay the most attention to employees.

Blake and Mouton (1964) developed their well-known Leadership Grid® based on contrasting the two dimensions of:

- (1) Concern for people.
- (2) Concern for production – again highlighting the dichotomy between task and relationship responsibilities in leadership.

Although leadership research in the late 1970s began to concentrate less on a situational perspective and more on organizational performance (Behling and McFillen, 1996; Contee-Borders, 2002; Hunt, 1991), the task (production) and relationship (people) dimensions of leadership have continued in some of the contemporary leadership literature (Bass, 1990a).

Transformational leadership and servant leadership are both high-order evolutions in leadership paradigms. Both theoretical frameworks emphasize a high concern for people and for production. However, transformational leadership incorporates a greater emphasis upon production because the leader has a stronger focus on organizational objectives. On the other hand, servant leadership involves a higher concern for people because the primary focus of the leader is upon his or her followers.

Transformational leadership and servant leadership are not antithetical, nor is either paradigm inherently superior to the other. Rather, transformational leadership and servant leadership are similar, complementary but distinctly different concepts. The observable differences between transformational leadership and servant leadership are certainly logical in light of some of the primary themes that have pervaded the leadership field. The differences between the theories in practice may be a function of both the organizational context in which the leaders operate and the personal values of the leaders.

### **The emergence of influence and motivation**

Another area of emerging distinction between transformational leaders and servant leaders is that of follower influence and motivation resulting from the focus of the leader. Anecdotal evidence suggests that transformational leaders rely more on their charismatic attributes to influence followers, whereas servant leaders significantly influence followers through service itself.

The motive of the servant leader's influence is not to direct others but rather to motivate and facilitate service and stewardship by the followers themselves. It is a humble means for affecting follower behavior. Servant leaders rely upon service to establish the purposes for meaningful work and to provide needed resources. It is a characteristically unique method for stimulating and influencing the behavior of others.

Transformational leaders rely upon their charismatic abilities. Bass (1960) and Etzioni (1961) identified charisma as a form of personal power. Instead of focusing on service as a means to motivation, transformational leaders rely more on their charismatic, enthusiastic nature to garner influence and motivate followers. They seek



to get followers to commit to various organizational goals and facilitate organizational objectives. Bass (1990b) said:

Attaining charisma in the eyes of one's employees is central to succeeding as a transformational leader. Charismatic leaders have great power and influence . . . [they] inspire and excite employees with the idea that they may be able to accomplish great things (p. 21).

In essence, transformational leaders develop a type of influence derived from their expertise, strength of relationships, and charismatic abilities.

Servant leaders, however, derive influence from service itself. They develop relationships where followers are encouraged to follow their lead of service. McKenna (1989) notes that servant-power is a category of influence outside the traditional kinds of power. Real servanthood is a leadership style that relies upon the influence of self-giving without self-glory.

### *Risks of manipulation and corruption*

Because leaders garner power, all forms of leadership carry with them the possibility for manipulation and corruption. This negative side of leadership is potentially problematic for persons aspiring to either transformational or servant leadership. The sources of influence and motivation inherent in the two leadership concepts carry with them certain distinct possibilities for manipulation.

In transformational leadership, personal power in the form of charisma can be very influential upon followers. In fact, the strength of the leader's charisma may determine his or her overall effectiveness. Strongly charismatic leaders can develop loyal, enthusiastic followers who may tend to overlook negative traits in their leaders. Consequently, if the leaders' motives or ethical standards are poor, they can manipulate their loyal constituency.

Conger (1990) argued that there can be a dark side to leadership. For example, leaders who are driven to accomplish their visions may ignore problems and misrepresent the realism of their visions. Clements and Washbush (1999) specifically assailed transformational leadership models for having overlooked potentially negative issues in leader-follower dynamics. Similarly, Kets de Vries (1993) cited personality problems that can lead to poor leader-follower relationships. For example, some leaders have narcissistic tendencies – they thrive on power and enjoy manipulation. Some followers have dependent dispositions and form strong connections to leaders who satisfy their dependency needs (Kets de Vries, 1989). Such imperfect human tendencies can lead to problems among charismatic leaders and their followers. History is replete with examples of political, religious, business, and other charismatic leaders who have manipulated their followers. Charisma may have allowed them to ascend to leadership positions, but they ultimately used their charisma in oppressive ways. Of course, such leaders whose standards are poor really function outside the genre of the ideal transformational leadership paradigm.

Since servant leaders do not rely on charisma, the risk of manipulation in this form of leadership comes from a different source. Servant leaders rely upon service, and in so doing, they endear the followers to the leaders in reciprocal relationships. Cialdini (2001) identified reciprocation as a primary means by which to influence people. According to the principle of reciprocation, when you do something for another person they are psychologically obliged to return the favor. Optimally, servant leaders have

motives that have the best interest of others in mind. Therefore, they should develop a positive form of reciprocation whereby they encourage followers to respond not by serving the leader but by serving others.

Of course, this law of reciprocity can potentially be used negatively. Persons who seek to be servant leaders, but have poor motives, can take advantage of others by inducing them to return acts of service. Such self-centered service can rapidly degenerate into a form of manipulation that can be more subtly coercive than overt exploitive behavior. However, those who use service for manipulative purposes abdicate the real responsibility of genuine servant leadership.

Clearly, both transformational leadership and servant leadership, like other leadership models, have potentially negative aspects. Yet the benefits of the two concepts far outweigh their negative sides. Additional investigation and field studies into the role influence and motivation play in transformational and servant leadership will further distinguish the characteristics of the concepts.

### **Research on servant leadership**

There is a long line of research focusing on transformational leadership. However, academic research on servant leadership is still in its infancy. Thus far, the research on servant leadership has focused mostly on the comparison of the servant leadership concept to other leadership methods and the identification of specific characteristics of servant leadership (see Farling *et al.*, 1999; Giampetro-Meyer *et al.*, 1998; Laub, 1999; Russell, 2000; Tice, 1996).

Farling *et al.* (1999) presented a concept of leadership based on the variables of vision, influence, credibility, trust, and service – characteristics of servant leadership frequently noted in the popular press. They concluded that servant leaders find the source of their values in a spiritual base. Furthermore, they argued that empowering followers allows the servant leader to act on his or her embedded values.

James Laub (1999) studied servant leadership in an attempt to define specific characteristics of the servant leadership concept through a written, measurable instrument. His research validates the idea of values as the basis for servant leadership. However, he qualified his conclusions by stating that additional empirical research is necessary to fully understand the relationship between values and servant leadership. Similarly, Horsman (2001) studied the idea of servant leadership as an emerging model of leadership and identified a relationship between servant leadership and the personal aspects of spirit.

Russell (2000, 2001) focused on understanding the values and attributes of servant leaders. He hypothesized that servant leaders possess different personal values than non-servant leaders, and these personal values are tied to the attributes of leadership. His research provided evidence of a relationship between values and leadership; however, the results indicated the need for additional empirical studies to further examine and validate the link.

Academic work in the field of servant leadership is growing. Since the concept continues to gain attention in practice, we can expect to see additional research in the area. Further academic studies will help us understand what leaders are willing to do to establish sustainable success and long-term productivity using servant leadership. The ability to clearly distinguish servant leadership from transformational leadership opens the door for clear definitions, constructs, and instrumentation.

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## Conclusion

The overviews of transformational leadership and servant leadership contained herein reveal many basic similarities between the two leadership theories. Both transformational leaders and servant leaders are visionaries, generate high levels of trust, serve as role models, show consideration for others, delegate responsibilities, empower followers, teach, communicate, listen, and influence followers. Certainly, transformational leadership and servant leadership are not antithetical theories. Rather, they are complementary ideologies because they both describe excellent forms of leadership. Nonetheless, there are significant points of variation in the concepts. Most importantly, transformational leaders tend to focus more on organizational objectives while servant leaders focus more on the people who are their followers.

The world has become more complicated, and dynamic times require dynamic, driven leaders (Williams, 1998). Both transformational leadership and servant leadership offer the conceptual framework for dynamic leadership. While transformational leadership has been well researched, and has become popular in practice, servant leadership theory needs further support. Nonetheless, servant leadership offers great opportunities for leaders.

Like transformational leadership, servant leadership can bring about real change in organizations, albeit through different means. When followers recognize that their leaders truly follow the ideals of servant leadership, then the followers are apparently more likely to become servants themselves, which decreases customer churn and increases long-term profitability and success (Braham, 1999). Overall, both servant leadership and transformational leadership offer valid, yet distinct paradigms for contemporary leadership in all types of organizations.

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