



ROTTERDAM SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT, ERASMUS UNIVERSITY

- ▶ Thinking smart about knowledge sharing

Rebecca Morris talks with Rob Zuidwijk and Bart Kuipers

- ▶ What value ethical leadership?

In discussion with Marius van Dijke, Steffen Giessner and Rob van Tulder

- ▶ A radical approach to radical innovation

By Dirk Deichmann and Jan van den Ende

- ▶ Close-tie entrepreneurial inspiration and business survival

By Jeroen P.J. de Jong

- ▶ Exploring the differentials between servant and transformational leadership

By Dirk van Dierendonck and Daan Stam

- ▶ Politics and perceptions in the demand for movies

By Jason Roos

- ▶ Sustainability bonuses: a credible sign of corporate responsibility?

By Paolo Perego



The business school that thinks and lives in the future

Exploring the differentials between servant and transformational leadership

By *Dirk van Dierendonck and Daan Stam*

Academic and managerial opinion has been divided for years over the respective merits of servant leadership and transformational leadership styles. However, a new study suggests that one can be just as effective as the other.

Traditionally, the transformational leader has attracted the most attention in the media and in business schools – the charismatic, visionary individual who puts the needs of the organisation ahead of the needs of the individual.

In the 1970s, a few scholars identified another type of leader who proceeded in the exact opposite way, yet still succeeded: the servant leader, a humble person who puts the needs of the individual ahead of the organisation and lets the employees take the lead.

Even today, however, transformational leaders get most of the glory, and servant leaders tend to be seen more as caretakers for mature organisations in stable markets. To find out whether this prejudice is justified, we undertook some empirical research with three of our students at RSM – Pieter Boersma, Ninotchka de Windt, and Jorrit Alkema.

The three studies we conducted demonstrated that although the sources of a servant leader's popularity are different than those of a transformational leader, the underlying behaviours of each leadership style complement one another in achieving employee engagement.

Which is better?

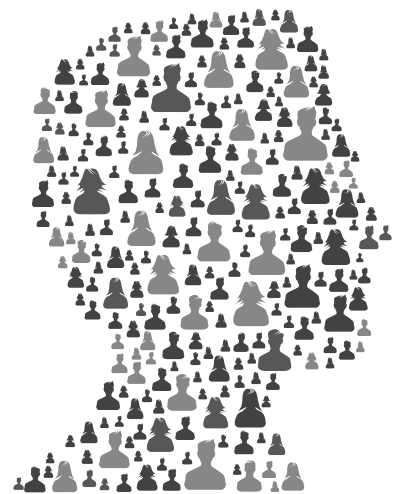
Transformational leaders encourage

their followers to perform beyond expectations: they emphasise collective values and needs rather than the values and needs of the individual. Employees like them because they offer an inspiring vision and are inclined to present themselves as a role model. Charisma is a primary tool of the trade for the transformational leader, who is seen as the centre of a process driving greater organisational effectiveness.

Servant leaders, on the other hand, focus on developing employees to their fullest potential. They rely on one-on-one communication to achieve their goals. Servant leaders attribute success to their followers rather than themselves.

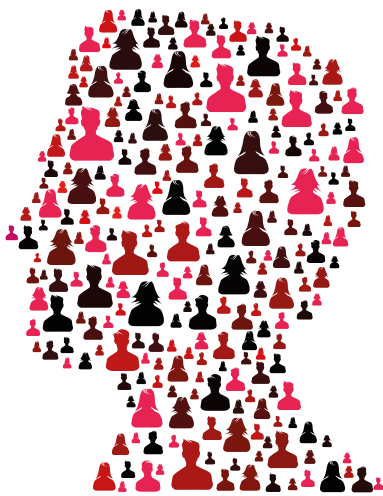
Which is better? Scholars have found theoretical advantages in either kind of leadership, but some have speculated that a servant leader is more suited to an organisation focused on preserving the status quo, while a transformational leader makes a better captain when the world is in flux. Before our three studies, however, no one had actually tried to prove this assertion empirically.

In our studies, we focused on the impact of servant leaders and transformational leaders on the emotional factor that matters most to the enterprise in the end: the employees' level of commitment to the organisation.



We conducted two experimental surveys and one field study to try to understand more about the impact of each kind of leadership. For the first study, 184 people from one of the co-authors' networks took a paper-and-pen test and were asked to imagine they were employees working for a transformational leader in a period of an uncertain business environment. For the second, 200 employees working in a hospital (mostly nurses and doctors) also took a hypothetical survey in which we asked them what it would be like to work for either a servant leader, a laissez-faire leader, or a transactional leader.

For the final study, we talked to 200 people employed as support staff for a major university and asked them to compare the levels of engagement they would feel working for a transformational leader versus a servant leader.



“...the underlying behaviours of each *leadership style* complement one another in achieving employee engagement.”

Among our findings

- Respondents considered leaders who show transformational qualities to be more effective, while leaders who demonstrate servant qualities are better at fulfilling the needs of their followers.
- However, neither kind of leadership has a special effect on organisational commitment: both kinds correlate to the strength of organisational commitment.
- This is not a feature of all kinds of leadership. We found levels of engagement to be lower for followers of either transactional leaders (leaders who focus mostly on concentrating on the task at hand) or laissez-faire leaders (leaders who leave their followers alone and shirk making decisions).
- We could not prove that servant leaders have a greater impact on

the degree of engagement in stable times than in uncertain times. Nor did we find that an uncertain environment enhances transformational leaders' effectiveness. In both cases, tough times reduce the level of engagement, but good servant leadership or good transformational leadership can mitigate the lower degree of connection employees feel with the organisation.

Conclusions

For most executives, our conclusion is good news: whether you're able to summon up your inner Churchill or not when you face your next crisis may not matter. Our work suggests that the servant leader does not appear to be at a special disadvantage in an uncertain environment, as other scholars have asserted. Employees appear to care less about the style of leadership than the substance, ie, they require evidence that the person at the top is aware of the challenges the organisation faces and is taking action. ■

This article is based on the paper *Same difference? Exploring the differential mechanisms linking servant leadership and transformational leadership to follower outcomes*, written by Dirk van Dierendonck, Daan Stam, Pieter Boersma, Ninotchka de Windt, and Jorrit Alkema. It has been published in *The Leadership Quarterly*, Volume 25, Issue 3, June 2014, Pages 544–562. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.014>

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Watch Dirk van Dierendonck explain the findings and implications of this research at: [WEB http://bit.ly/1k0LJjz](http://bit.ly/1k0LJjz)