Leadership and Innovation: A Framework for Organizational Change Through Servant Leadership Constructs

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Abstract

This article presents a novel approach to understanding the role of leadership in fostering organizational innovation by focusing on the intrinsic qualities that define an innovative leader. Unlike traditional leadership models that emphasize the actions leaders must take to drive innovation, this study highlights the dispositional attributes that inherently predispose leaders to be innovative. Through a comprehensive literature review, the article examines various leadership styles, including transformational, transactional, ethical, ambidextrous, and entrepreneurial leadership, highlighting their reliance on the leader's influence over followers to achieve innovative outcomes. Among these, servant leadership is identified as uniquely effective due to its follower-centric approach, which prioritizes the development, well-being, and empowerment of followers above organizational goals. A servant leadership construct is proposed, and a mapping exercise is conducted tracing the constructs to empirical evidence that supports their role in producing positive innovation results. The study concludes by proposing a framework that maps servant leadership constructs to specific innovative behaviors and outcomes, offering a structured approach to understanding the direct influence of servant leadership traits on innovation. This research contributes to the leadership and innovation discourse by advocating for a shift from action-based leadership strategies to a focus on the essential characteristics that define truly innovative leaders.

Introduction

Innovation is the lifeblood of any corporation, crucial for maintaining competitiveness and industry influence in both prosperous and challenging times. As Thomas Kelley (2001) emphasized, innovation enables a company to grow faster, better, and smarter than its competitors. In times of economic downturn, the ability to innovate can be the difference between survival and obsolescence. Schwartz (2004) further noted that

investors often base their confidence in a company's future on its capacity for innovation. Therefore, leaders must prioritize creating an innovative culture to assure stakeholders of the company's long-term viability. The ability to innovate is no longer optional but a necessity for thriving in today's competitive business landscape.

Traditional innovation methodologies often impose significant changes that can lead to internal resistance and inefficiencies. May (2007) pointed out that getting "better" is important when a company has maximized its efficiency but being "different" is essential for survival. Historically, the authoritarian leadership style was prized in the pursuit of high-output organization. Under the traditional authoritative style of leadership, followers who face challenges that require cooperation and creativity tend to outsource their primary functioning to the leader, resulting in organizations being rigid to change (Morgan, 2006, p. 29). Oster (2010) described how overreliance on these traditional business strategies results in "innovation antibodies" that drive innovative employees underground (p. 569). Contrary to the demands of high output experienced by traditionally authoritarian organizations, modern organizations are facing the pressure of increased competition, rapidly changing environments, and shifting consumer interests (Daft, 2001). In the current competitive business environment, organizations are required to prioritize innovation as a fundamental strategy to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage (Ting, 2012).

Oster (2010) emphasized that corporate leadership must shift from tradition to entrepreneurial innovation and uplifting impediments and roadblocks to localized innovation within the organization, allowing the once-underground innovators to emerge. The role of leadership in unlocking a dynamic, innovative organization is emphasized by the change in leadership style from authoritarian to leadership styles, including but not limited to transactional, charismatic, transformational, ethical, and sustainable (Gresov, 1984; Iqbal et al., 2021; Ullah et al., 2021). A common thread amongst these emerging leadership styles is the focus on increasing the effectiveness and performance of the organization's employees. By enhancing the performance of the employee, leaders can gain organizational performance benefits and position their organization for innovative success. Though early research focused broadly on both internal and external means that drive innovation (Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Rogers, 1983), more recent research has emphasized the role of the leader as a crucial component of organizational innovation (Howell & Higgins, 1990).

Research has uncovered clear evidence that organizational leadership and top-level management have a direct impact on organizational innovation (Alblooshi et al., 2020; Elenkov & Manev, 2005; Hunter & Cushenbery, 2011; Waite, 2014). Hunter and Cushenbery (2011) posited that leaders play a pivotal role in shaping innovative outcomes by transitioning their emphasis from fostering idea generation among

individuals and teams to selectively determining which products and services should be advanced to market. They are also tasked with overcoming opposition to change and reconciling the interests of various stakeholder groups. An organization's top management is responsible for enabling the means of innovation including setting the right organizational structure and culture suitable for innovation (Lee et al., 2023; Llopis, 2017).

Howell and Higgins (1990) found that leadership personality is crucial to achieving tangible innovations, titling the leader as an innovation *champion* who embodies risk taking, influence, and innovativeness. Leaders extend their desire for an innovative culture amongst the organization most notably through organizational learning, knowledge sharing, and empowerment (Liao et al., 2017; Mai et al., 2022; Shafique et al., 2019). Ullah et al. (2021) cited the leader's responsibility to impact and balance human capital (skills and creativity) and social capital (resources). Steele and Watts (2022) came to a similar conclusion, citing how traits and behaviors (self-efficacy and empowerment) work together with leadership actions to influence group behavior, resulting in innovation success.

Leadership Impact on Innovation

Howell and Higgins (1990) boldly challenged previous assertions that a leader's personality is less important than external effects in influencing employee sentiment in organizational settings. Their findings suggested that by ignoring dispositional attributes, one neglects major variables relevant to achieving organizational innovation. In their follow-up study, Howell and Avolio (1993) attributed these dispositional variables to those found within the transformational leader. Based on the seminal work of Bass (1985), Howell and Avolio concluded that the charismatic traits of a transformational leader, including individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence, are the primary leadership attributes that influence innovation.

Research published since Howell and Avolio (1993) has confirmed these findings, supporting the positive correlation between transformational leadership and organizational innovation (Cui et al., 2022; Jung et al., 2008; Pieterse et al., 2009). Researchers have also uncovered mediating traits and behaviors that supplement and clarify the relationship between transformational leadership and innovation. Le (2020) found psychological human capital, through the installment of self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience, to mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational innovation. Pieterse et al. (2009) found that empowerment and creative self-efficacy behaviors mediate the relationship. Trust and individual identification were found to play an intermediary role in the relationship between organizational innovation and transformational leadership (Y. Xie et al., 2018).

Transactional leadership is commonly chosen as an alternative to the transformational leadership style due to its close ties with the theories proposed by Bass (1985). Although some researchers have found transactional leadership to have a negative effect on innovation (Costa et al., 2023; Pieterse et al., 2009), others find that it can support innovation if mediated by trust, organizational learning, and organizational culture (Cui et al., 2022; Sethibe & Steyn, 2015; Y. Xie et al, 2018).

Despite the common themes of transformational and transactional leadership that emerge when digging into the impact of leadership on innovation, empirical study has found support for alternative styles that impact innovation. Leadership styles such as ambidextrous, entrepreneurial, developmental, ethical, strategic, sustainable, and servant leadership are all included in this body of research into the topic. A common theme among the leadership styles included in these studies is the focus on unlocking the potential of an organization's members. This includes the aforementioned transformational leader's qualities of intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, idealized influence, and individualized consideration, which are all designed to boost the effectiveness of the individual (Cui et al., 2022; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Rehman et al., 2019). The components of transactional leadership including contingent reward, active management by exception, and passive management by exception are similarly designed to enhance the individual performance first, all to produce positive organizational outcomes.

Despite the body of research that suggests that follower-centric leadership styles result in greater innovation outcomes, there is very little consensus over the specific leadership traits and behaviors that are correlated with a positive impact on organizational innovation. Research remains unclear on identifying a single leadership profile that is optimal for innovation. Considering these discoveries, this article attempts to answer the Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the key traits and behaviors of a leader that positively impact innovation in organizations?

Literature Review

Leadership and Innovation

To explore RQ1, a literature review is conducted on the topic of leadership influence on innovation. Research data pools included the Regent University Library, powered by PRIMO, in addition to Google Scholar. Keyword search terms included "leadership," "impact/influence," "organization/organizational," and "innovation" in various phrase structures with the goal of uncovering the largest breadth of relevant sources possible. Criteria for inclusion consisted of studies that were peer reviewed and offered empirical support for their theories with data-driven methodologies.

Studies that have focused on the leadership type or style that influenced organizational innovation and noted specific characteristics, traits, or behaviors that correlated with positive innovation results were considered for inclusion. Though many studies unpack tactical implementations made by top management to unlock innovation, this literature focuses on studies that unpack the specific leadership qualities (traits, behaviors, attributes) that impact innovation.

Additional filtering criteria were applied based on the type of innovation studied. Although research into organizational innovation is expansive, there is very little in terms of a universally accepted definition for innovation (Sethibe & Steyn, 2015). Several interpretations and definitions have been brought forth by researchers; however, for the purpose of avoiding ambiguous definitions of innovation, the literature review into the effect of leadership on innovation will focus on 4 innovation types; organizational innovative performance (OIP), innovative work behavior (IWB), product/process/R&D innovation, and technological innovation. Literature review findings are summarized in the following section, segmented by innovation type.

Findings

An initial review of the literature on RQ1 uncovered 47 relevant studies. However, 10 studies were removed from consideration due to poor definitions of organizational innovation or methodologies that rely on theoretical support rather than empirical. A total of 37 studies were considered for further review. Each article was scanned for results that link a specific leadership "trait," "behavior/behaviour," "attribute," or "characteristic" to positive innovation outcomes, agnostic of the leadership style that was studied. A summary of the findings is discussed, followed by a table summarizing the results. The conclusion of the literature review is used to propose a hypothesis based on the findings addressing RQ1.

Organizational Innovative Performance

OIP has been offered as the overall ability of an organization to generate, accept, and implement innovations (Drucker, 1985) It involves the organization's capacity to create a culture that fosters innovation, leading to improved performance and competitiveness (Ahsan et al., 2021). Damanpour (1991) provided a more focused definition applicable to the organizational context, stating that OIP is the adoption of an idea or behavior that is new to the organization.

Several studies have concluded that the presence of transformational leadership among an organization's top management has a positive effect on OIP (Al-Husseini et al., 2019; Jung et al., 2008; Li et al., 2018; Sethibe & Steyn, 2015). Systemic organizational learning processes emerge in research as a mediator of the relationship between transformational leadership and OIP (Cui et al. 2022; Liao et al., 2017; Rehman et al., 2019). Rehman et al.

(2019) described organizational learning as a change in behavior or cognition within an organization that enables the development of a range of innovative behaviors. This definition aligns with Cui et al.'s (2022) perspective, who viewed organizational learning as a change in the organization's knowledge that arises from experience. Liao et al. (2017) contributed to this understanding by highlighting that organizational learning involves the development of organizational knowledge, moving away from a purely behaviorist interpretation of learning. Additionally, Nguyen et al. (2023) found that transformational leadership is a significant predictor of employee creativity and that creativity mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and OIP. Y. Xie et al. (2018) found empirical support for trust and individual identity as necessary mediators for transformational leaders to positively influence OIP.

Sethibe and Steyn (2015) found that transactional leadership has a positive influence on OIP but only when organizational innovative culture is high. Rehman et al. (2019) and Cui et al. (2022) found organizational learning to be a required mediator between transactional leadership and OIP. Y Xie et al. (2018) found high trust to moderate the relationship between transactional leadership and OIP, where a lack of organizational trust renders transactional leadership ineffective for OIP. Alternatively, Howell and Avolio (1993) found transactional leadership to have a negative effect on OIP. This finding is supported by Nguyen et al. (2023), who found transactional leadership to hurt OIP and creativity.

Alblooshi et al. (2020), in their systematic review of the relationship between leadership styles and OIP, found that an ambidextrous leadership style is optimal for improved OIP. Their ambidextrous leadership model includes a blend of qualities from transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, humorous leadership, servant leadership, and self-leadership to influence the behaviors of empowerment, trust, creativity, motivation, and belonging. Zacher and Rosing (2015) supported this finding and expanded on it by highlighting ambidextrous leadership's positive influence on OIP by means of opening (encouraging exploration, stimulating divergent thinking, providing flexibility, resource allocation for new ventures) and closing (encouraging exploitation, implementing and standardizing processes, monitoring and controlling, rewarding efficiency and results) behaviors.

Waite (2014) found that developmental leadership, with its focus on leadership capacity building, has a positive influence on OIP. Waite cited the developmental leadership model provided by Gilley et al. (2011) who defined developmental leadership as the process of equipping people with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities they need to grow, develop, change, and become more effective. Shafique et al. (2019), in their empirical study into ethical leadership on OIP, found that knowledge sharing and empowerment work together to produce creativity and that creativity mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and OIP. Waite alternatively proposed a

theoretical link between servant leadership and OIP through its focus on communication, vision, concern for others, and a global mindset. Hughes et al. (2018) provided empirical support for this claim and found servant leadership to have a positive influence on OIP and creativity.

Organizational Innovative Work Behavior. Organizational IWB is a broad-stroke term for innovative performance as applied to the individual of the organization. IWB refers to the actions of individuals or teams within an organization that are directed towards the initiation and intentional application of new ideas, products, processes, or procedures to the workplace (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010; Janssen, 2000). West and Farr (1990) earlier conceptualized IWB as behaviors aimed at the intentional introduction and application of new and useful ideas, processes, products, or procedures. Organizational IWB focuses on the behaviors exhibited by employees within the organization that contribute to innovation (Dedahanov et al., 2017).

Pieterse et al. (2009) in their empirical study found that transformational leadership had a positive effect on IWB, but only when empowerment was high (Afsar & Umrani, 2020). Pieterse et al. additionally concluded that transactional leadership had an overall negative effect on IWB. Afsar and Umrani (2020) found that innovation climate, task complexity, and motivation to learn mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and IWB. Berdecia-Cruz et al. (2022) found empirical support for the influence of gender on transactional leadership effectiveness, concluding that female leaders were more strongly associated with positive transactional leadership outcomes for IWB.

Odoardi et al. (2015) found support for their hypotheses that participative leadership, if combined with teamwork and information sharing, positively predicted perceptions of team support for innovation and team vision, which, in turn, fostered psychological empowerment and IWB. Berdecia-Cruz et al. (2022) provided empirical support for Llopis' (2017) proposal on innovative mindset leadership, which declares the innovative mentality of leadership enables them to unleash the full potential of the rest of the team members to achieve organizational success. Cited traits of the innovative mindset leader include visionary leadership, risk taking, adaptability, empowerment, collaboration, customer-centricity, continuous learning, and resilience.

Humble leadership (as defined by their possessing open-mindedness, empowerment, and inclusivity) is also linked to positive IWB outcomes when mediated by employee core self-evaluation (CSE) and political skills (Zhou & Wu, 2018). Zhou and Wu (2018) found that CSE moderates the influence of humble leadership personality traits on IWB. Akbari et al. (2020) found support for the positive influence of entrepreneurial leadership on IWB. They found theoretical support for the notion that entrepreneurial

leaders who prioritize employees direct their senses of empowerment, autonomy, and self-determination as behaviors that influence IWB.

Ullah et al. (2021) found that the values encompassed by ethical leadership (open communication, respect, fairness, trust, balanced decision, embolden followers) have a positive influence on IWB. Song et al. (2023) concluded that ethical leadership has a positive influence on IWB but only when the organizational innovative environment is high. Song et al. additionally concluded that servant leadership has a positive influence on IWB and is especially suited for low-innovation organizational environments.

Product/Process/R&D Innovation. Product and process innovation involves the development of new products, services, or processes that offer value to customers and improve operational efficiency (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). This type of tactical innovation is suited for the employment of customer-facing value. Damanpour and Aravind (2012) referred to process innovations as making minor adjustments or improvements to existing processes to enhance efficiency, reduce costs, or improve quality. These innovations are often evolutionary rather than revolutionary, making them easier to implement and less risky compared to major product overhauls. The emergence of research and development (R&D) units in organizations highlights the structural changes required to break through innovation barriers. R&D innovation practices typically aim at improving the speed, efficiency, or cost-effectiveness of R&D activities. The R&D innovation type can be defined as a classification that differentiates between traditional R&D, which involves formal R&D activities conducted by specialized units, and non-R&D, which encompasses innovation efforts that may not adhere to conventional R&D practices (Tsuji et al., 2018; X. Xie et al., 2019).

Costa et al. (2023) found empirical support for the influence of transformational leadership on product and process innovation and democratic leadership for general innovation. They also found transactional leadership and autocratic leadership to have a negative effect on all three innovation types. The emphasis on employee-centric human capital was found to play a moderating role in the positive influence of democratic and transformational leadership on product, process, and general innovation.

In their research reviews, Llopis (2017) and Kesting et al. (2016) concluded that different stages and types of product, process, and R&D innovation raise different leadership requirements. In their framework, innovation type is decided by the goals of the innovation (bottom of the funnel) and then driven by the leader (top of the funnel). The means and effects used to achieve innovation goals were instrumental in the employment of particular leadership styles including transformational, transactional, charismatic, participative, interactive, and instrumental.

Hou et al. (2019) conducted a survey-based empirical study over benevolent, authoritarian, moral, and paternalistic leadership styles on tangible exploratory (novel product/process/R&D) and exploitative (refine product/process/R&D) innovations. They found support for the positive effect of benevolent and moral leadership on exploratory innovations. Paternalistic leadership was found to have a positive effect on exploitative innovations, while authoritarian leadership had a negative effect on both innovation types. Environmental dynamism played a strong mediating role in all leadership and innovation effects.

Technology Innovation. Technological innovation is characterized by four distinct components including a physical tools component, a codified knowledge component, a human skills component, and a systemized methods component (Hanif et al., 2020; de Vries et al., 2015). A combination of the external and internal components produces successful technological innovation in the marketplace. Technological innovation might also involve the adoption of new technologies and equipment within an organization's products, services, or processes, aiming to enhance operational efficiency and performance (Jia et al., 2022). Nieto (2004) introduced a nuanced view of this concept, describing it as a dynamic process where technical innovations are continuously refined. This process effectively addresses both internal organizational challenges and market demands, thereby not only improving efficiency but also bolstering the relationships between the organization and its employees, as well as with its customers.

Howell and Higgins (1990) and Chen et al. (2012) found empirical support for the positive influence of transformational leadership on technological innovation. Chen et al. found that financial incentive adoption mediated the effects of transformational leadership on technological innovation. Howell and Higgins additionally found entrepreneurial leadership to have a positive influence on technological innovation as a result of its emphasis on risk taking, influence, and innovativeness.

Wanaswa et al. (2021) found strategic leadership to have a positive influence on technological innovation. Energizing, belief in change, and organizational setting (proximity and emphasis of home country) additionally contributed to the effectiveness of strategic leadership on technological innovation. Jiang et al. (2022) concluded that knowledge-oriented leadership, when combined with leader–member exchange (LMX), creates the conditions for technological innovation by creating an atmosphere conducive to knowledge management, openness, inclusiveness, swift trust, mutual trust, and mutual appreciation.

Yang et al. (2023) studied the effects of ambidextrous leadership, transformational leadership, and transactional leadership on technological innovation. They find ambidextrous leadership to surpass transformational and transactional in its effects on technological innovation. They also find employee psychological distance to play a

mediating role in the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and technological leadership.

Summary

Throughout the literature review, several leadership traits and behaviors consistently emerged as closely associated with fostering innovation within organizations. Notable examples include empowerment, creativity, vision, and trust. Moreover, our review revealed a broad spectrum of leadership styles that have been studied for their impact on innovation, including transformational, transactional, ethical, ambidextrous, entrepreneurial, and servant leadership styles. Each of these styles has been associated with various degrees of success in enhancing organizational innovative capacities, often mediated by factors such as organizational culture, global setting, social or political capital, and organizational learning processes. A recurring theme across these studies is the importance of leadership traits that empower and inspire employees, facilitate open communication, and foster a supportive culture conducive to innovation.

The diverse findings among various innovation types, leadership types, noted traits and behaviors, mediators, and external factors that influence innovation are best portrayed through the formation of a table summary. To better analyze the results of the literature review, Table 1 is introduced as a summarization of the literature review findings into a table. Each row represents a unique study and includes (from left to right) an assigned code, the citation, the type of innovation studied, and the leadership type that was studied. A summary of the findings is organized to note if a positive (+) or negative (-) impact was found between the variables studied, including any relevant mediators. Traits and behaviors of leadership with empirical support for their positive impact on innovation were captured, as well as other outside factors, and cited mediators.

Table 1

Leadership Constructs and Organizational Innovation – Literature Review Findings

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
S1	Jiang et al. (2022)	Technological innovation	Knowledge-oriented leadership	Knowledge-oriented leadership (+) LMX (+) Technological innovation	Openness, inclusiveness, swift trust, mutual trust, mutual appreciation	LMX	LMX
S2	Waite (2014)	OIP	Developmental leadership, servant leadership	(Primary) Developmental leadership (+) Organizational innovation (Secondary) Servant leadership (+) Organizational innovation	Communication, vision, concern for others, global mindset	Leadership capacity building	
S3	Alblooshi et al. (2020)	OIP	Ambidextrous leadership	Ambidextrous leadership (+) Organizational innovation	Empowerment, trust, creativity, motivation, belonging		

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
S4	Ullah et al. (2021)	IWB	Ethical leadership	Ethical leadership (+) Org. IWBs	creativity, open communication, respect, fairness, trust, balanced decision, empower followers	Social capital (resources)	
S5	Wanaswa et al. (2021).	Technological innovation	Strategic leadership	Strategic leadership (+) Technological innovation	Energizing, belief in change	Organizational setting	Strategic leadership
S6	Al-Husseini et al. (2019)	Product innovation	Transformational leadership	Transformational leadership (+) Product innovation	Idealized influence, vision, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration		
S7	Iqbal et al. (2021)	Technological innovation	Sustainable leadership	Sustainable leadership (+) Frugal tech innovation		Power distance	Technology turbulence

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
						Uncertainty avoidance	Market turbulence
S8	Hou et al. (2019)	OIP	Benevolent leadership, authoritarian leadership, moral leadership, paternalistic leadership	Benevolent leadership (+) Exploratory Moral leadership (+) environmental dynamism (+) Exploratory Paternalistic leadership (+) environmental dynamism (+) Exploitative		Environmental dynamism	Environmental Dynamism

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
				Authoritarian leadership (-) Exploratory and exploitative			
S9	Chen et al. (2012)	Technological innovation	Transformational leadership	Transformational leadership (+) Technological innovation	Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration	Financial incentive adoption (-)	
S10	Shafique et al. (2019)	OIP	Ethical leadership	Ethical leadership (+) Organizational innovation	Knowledge sharing, empowerment, creativity		Knowledge sharing, empowerment
S11	Jung et al. (2008)	OIP	Transformational leadership	Transformational leadership (+) Organizational innovation	Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and	High power distance (Taiwan) Competition	

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
					individual consideration		
S12	Zhou & Wu (2018)	IWBs	Humble leadership	Humble leadership (+) Org. innovative behavior—individual	Employee CSE, open-mindedness, inclusivity, empowering	CSE and political skills	CSE and political skills
S13	Song et al. (2023)	IWBs	Ethical leadership, servant leadership	Servant leadership (+) low-innovative environments (+) IWBs		Organizational climate	Innovative environment (high or low)
				Ethical leadership (+) high-innovative environments (+) IWBs			
S14	Akbari et al. (2020)	IWBs	Entrepreneurial leadership	Entrepreneurial leadership (+) IWBs (+) Org. innovative performance	Encouraging, empowering, autonomy, self-		

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
					determination, creative self-efficacy		
S15	Pieterse et al. (2009)	IWBs	Transformational leadership, transactional leadership	Transformational leadership (+) high empowerment (+) IWBs Transactional leadership (-) IWBs	Empowerment, creative self-efficacy		Empowerment
S16	Zacher & Rosing (2015)	IWBs	Ambidextrous leadership, transformational leadership	Ambidextrous leadership (+) IWBs	Opening and closing behaviors: monitors and controls goal attainment, establishes routines and takes corrective action, controls adherence to rules, pays attention to uniform task accomplishment,		

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
					sanctions errors, and sticks to plans.		
S17	Yang et al. (2023)	Technological innovation	Ambidextrous leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership	Ambidextrous leadership (+) Technological innovation	Employee psychological distance		Employee psychological distance
S18	Antonio et al. (2021)	IWBs	Servant leadership	Servant leadership (+) team climate, ambidexterity (+) IWBs	Ambidexterity	Team climate	Ambidexterity and team climate
S19	Berdecia-Cruz et al. (2022)	IWBs	Innovative mindset leadership, transactional leadership	Innovative mindset leadership (+) IWBs	Visionary leadership, risk taking, adaptability, empowerment, collaboration, customer-centricity,		

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
					continuous learning, resilience		
S20	Rehman et al. (2019)	OIP	Transformational leadership, transactional leadership	Transformational leadership (+) org learning (+) Org innovative performance Transactional Leadership (+) Org Learning (+) Org Innov Performance		Organizational learning	Organizational learning
S21	Cui et al. (2022)	OIP	Transformational leadership, transactional leadership	Transformational leadership (+) org learning (+) Innovative performance Transactional leadership (+) org		Organizational learning	Organizational learning

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
				learning (+) Innovative performance			
S22	Howell & Higgins (1990)	Technological innovation	Transformational leadership, entrepreneurial leadership	Transformational leadership (+) Technological innovation Entrepreneurial leadership (+) Technological innovation	Risk taking, influence, innovativeness		
S23	Howell & Avolio (1993)	OIP	Transformational leadership, transactional leadership	Transformational leadership (+) Organizational innovation Transactional leadership (-) Organizational innovation	Charisma, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation		
S24	Hughes et al. (2018)	OIP	Servant leadership	Servant leadership (+) Organizational innovation	Creativity		

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
S25	Costa et al. (2023)	Product Process General	Transformational, transactional, autocratic, democratic	Transformational (+) Product, process innovation Transactional (-) General, product, process innovation Autocratic (-) General, product, process innovation Democratic (+) General innovation		Human capital	Human capital
S26	Liao et al. (2017)	OIP	Transformational, transactional	Leadership (+) org. learning (+) Org. innovation		Org. learning, industry type	Org. learning, industry type

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
S27	Nguyen et al. (2023)	OIP	Transformational, transactional	Transformational (+) org innovation (+) Creativity Transactional (-) org. Innovation (-) Creativity		Creativity	Creativity
S28	Le (2020)	OIP	Transformational	Transformational (+) psychological human capital (+) Innovation	Self-efficacy, hope, optimism, resilience		
S29	Afsar & Umrani (2020)	IWBs	Transformational	Transformational (+) motivation to learn (+) Innovative behaviors		Innovation, climate, task complexity	
S30	Mai et al. (2022)	OIP		Core self-evaluation, narcissism, the need for achievement, and risk propensity (+) Innovation	Core self-evaluation, narcissism, the need for achievement, and risk propensity,	Knowledge acquisition, knowledge distribution, knowledge interpretation	Knowledge acquisition, knowledge distribution, knowledge interpretation

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
S31	Y. Xie et al. (2018)	OIP	Transformational, transactional	Transformational (+) trust and individual identification (+) Org. innovative performance Transactional (+) trust (+) Org. innovative performance	Trust, individual identification		
S32	Łukowski (2017)	R&D, product, process, implementation	Transformational, transactional, charismatic, participative, interactive, instrumental			Goals—innovation type (People → means → effects → goals)	
S33	Li et al. (2018)	OIP	Transformational, transactional	Transformational (+) Org. innovation	Inspirational motivation, individualized consideration		

No.	Citation	Innovation type	Leadership type	Findings summary	Traits and behaviors that impact innovation	Other factors that impact innovation	Mediators
S34	Kesting et al. (2016)	R&D, product, process, implementation	Transformational, transactional, charismatic, participative, interactive, instrumental			Goals—innovation type (People → means → effects → goals)	
S35	Sethibe & Steyn (2015)	OIP	Transformational, transactional	Transformational (+) Org. innovative performance Transactional (+) Org. culture = Org. innovative performance		Organizational learning	
S36	Odoardi et al. (2015)	IWB	Participative leadership	Participative leadership (+) IWB	Vision, empowerment, teamwork	Teamwork, information sharing	
S37	Burpitt & Bigoness (1997)	IWB	Empowering leaders	Empowering leader (+) Team innovation	Self-efficacy		

Conclusion

The extensive literature review on leadership constructs and their impact on organizational innovation reveals a multifaceted landscape where different leadership styles uniquely influence various innovation types. Leadership's role in promoting innovation is evident across several distinct styles, each contributing uniquely to the innovative capacities of organizations. Transformational leadership, frequently cited in the literature, relies heavily on the leader's ability to exert influence, motivate, and guide their followers towards innovative behaviors and outcomes, placing the onus on the leader to lead change effectively. This style is characterized by leaders who inspire and motivate their followers, challenging them to exceed their own limitations and think creatively. Studies such as those by Howell and Higgins (1990) and Hughes et al. (2018) highlight transformational leaders' ability to foster environments that nurture innovation through intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation.

Transactional leadership, while also influential, presents a more complex picture. Research has indicated that transactional leadership can positively impact OIP but primarily when an innovative culture is already high within the organization (Sethibe & Steyn, 2015). Trust is a critical moderator in this relationship; without high organizational trust, transactional leadership may be ineffective or even detrimental to innovation (Howell & Avolio, 1993; Y. Xie et al., 2018).

Ethical and ambidextrous leadership styles also prominently support the creation of innovative and ethical organizations. Ethical leaders emphasize open communication, fairness, and trust, creating an ethical climate conducive to innovation. Ambidextrous leaders, capable of effectively managing dual strategies of exploration and exploitation, are particularly effective in environments where technological innovation is critical.

Across the different leadership styles, several common traits and behaviors emerge as beneficial for fostering innovation. Empowerment and motivation are pivotal, encouraging employees to take initiative and engage in creative problem-solving. Ethical and inclusive practices ensure a work environment where diverse ideas can flourish without bias or barriers. Vision and risk taking are critical, providing a roadmap for innovation and inspiring team members to strive towards these new frontiers. Communication and trust are also commonly cited for their foundational impact on fostering an innovative culture. The instillment of creative self-efficacy among a leader's followers emerges as a common theme among innovative organizations.

In conclusion, the literature supports that no single leadership style is universally suitable for fostering innovation. Instead, an effective leadership profile for innovation must provide frontline support to the employees and integrate traits from various leadership styles to create a supportive, empowering, and ethically robust environment.

Leaders who prioritize their team's well-being and development emerge as the most capable of driving sustainable innovation. Despite the effectiveness of these leadership styles in driving innovation, they primarily position the leader as the central figure responsible for initiating and guiding change. This dynamic, while effective, underscores the importance of the leader's influence and ability to create conditions favorable for innovation. In contrast, servant leadership emerges as a unique style that places the followers above the leader and the organization itself. Servant leadership focuses on serving the needs of the followers, prioritizing their development, and fostering a supportive environment where innovation can thrive. Given its follower-centric approach, servant leadership deserves a closer examination as a model for fostering innovation.

Emergence of Servant Leadership. Servant leadership is suggested as a compelling framework for fostering innovation due to its alignment with key drivers of innovative behavior and employee-centric focus. Empirical evidence highlights those traits and behaviors inherent in servant leadership, even when not explicitly stated, closely intersect with those required to enhance an organization's innovative culture (Antonio et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2018; Song et al., 2023; Waite, 2014).

A supportive and empowering environment is fundamental for innovation, and servant leadership naturally promotes such an environment by prioritizing employee growth and well-being. This focus on empowerment enables employees to take initiative and engage in creative problem-solving, essential for fostering innovation (Hughes et al., 2018). Ethical behavior and visionary leadership, central to servant leadership, also play a crucial role in driving innovation by inspiring trust and commitment among employees (Winston & Fields, 2015).

Trust and collaboration are critical for innovative outcomes, and servant leadership fosters a high level of both by valuing open communication and mutual respect within teams. This collaborative culture encourages the free flow of ideas and collective problem solving, leading to enhanced creativity and innovation (Hanif et al., 2020). Additionally, the focus on individual and collective growth, a hallmark of servant leadership, results in higher levels of innovative behavior and organizational commitment (Song et al., 2023).

Moreover, team ambidexterity, the ability to balance exploration and exploitation activities, is crucial for innovation, particularly in tech start-ups. Servant leadership supports this balance by encouraging a culture that values both creative exploration and efficient execution (Antonio et al., 2021). This alignment enhances the team's ability to innovate and adapt to changing environments.

In conclusion, the traits and behaviors that drive innovation—such as empowerment, ethical conduct, trust, collaboration, and a focus on growth—are inherently aligned with the principles of servant leadership. This intersection underscores the potential of servant leadership as an optimal framework for fostering a culture of continuous innovation and organizational success. Considering these findings, this study discusses servant leadership as a primary contender to fit the profile of a suitable leader for achieving innovation, due to its people-centric focus and emphasis on empowerment.

Defining Servant Leadership. Transformational leadership, the most frequently cited leadership style by researchers for its positive influence on innovation, shares a similarity with servant leadership in terms of empowerment of the individual. However, Stone et al. (2004) asserted the critical difference between transformational leadership and servant leadership lies in the key objective of the leader. For transformational leaders, the ultimate goal is to achieve organizational objectives and generate positive organizational outcomes, where the employee serves as a means to achieve that end. What Greenleaf (1977) suggested and Stone et al. reinforced was a leadership style that is contrary to the standard goal of organizational success, one that forsakes the organization as its focus and places it solely on the individual. Additionally, research has found servant leadership to be clearly distinct from transformational leadership in terms of social responsibility, follower needs, and its impact on positive employee performance (Parolini et al., 2009). Servant leaders distinguish themselves from other leadership styles as their focus is placed solely on the uplifting and service of their employees, with positive organizational outcomes as a secondary outcome.

Winston and Fields (2015) described how critics of servant leadership point to its difficulty in attributing the operational facet of servant leaders with positive outcomes. However, research is slowly proving that these positive outcomes come by way of servant leadership characteristics (Zubairu, 2020). Covey (1998) highlighted the method that distinguishes servant leadership in terms of influencing organizational outcomes: "*If you really want to get servant-leadership, then you've got to have institutionalization of the principles at an organizational level and foster trust through individual character and competence at the personal level*" (p. xvii). Based on Covey's assertion, servant leaders primarily influence through the principles by which they embody.

Andersen (2009) suggested that servant leadership qualities may make a company more successful over the longer term and proposed this "bottom-up" style as more sustainable than traditional "top-down" styles of leadership. Servant leaders prioritize the needs of their team members, helping each individual to develop and excel in their roles. This leadership approach not only enhances individual employee performance but also cultivates a collaborative and innovative organizational culture. Empirical studies, such as those by Hughes et al. (2018), Antonio et al. (2021), and Song et al.

(2023), support the notion that servant leadership is linked positively with both OIP and creativity, suggesting that the servant leadership style fosters an environment where innovation is likely to flourish. Hanif et al (2020) found that servant leadership helps build trust among employees and their organization and lays the foundation for an innovative culture.

Williams et al. (2017) found empirical support for the positive influence of servant leaders on employee creativity by means of direct support, trust, and empowerment. Ehrhart (2004) suggested that values-driven leadership results in positive outcomes in employee commitment and organizational citizenship behavior. These behaviors come by way of the empathy, foresight, and organizational stewardship characteristics of the servant leader, which translates to employees who are more willing to put in extra effort toward their shared goals. Winston and Fields (2015) showed how these results lead to a more integrity-based, ethical, and adaptable organization. Not only do employees find greater satisfaction in their work, but their performance and increased organizational commitment results in an organization that thrives in uncertain environments (Ehrhart, 2004).

Given the alignment of servant leadership traits with those identified as crucial for driving innovation and the empirical evidence supporting its effectiveness, it is essential to further explore this leadership style as potentially optimal for fostering innovation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_1:   The profile of a servant leader—including their characteristics, traits, and/or behaviors—fits that of a leader who effectively drives innovation within organizations.

Methodology

To support H_1, this study reviews servant leadership literature to construct consensus and suggest a framework for a servant leadership constructs profile. Traits and behaviors uncovered during the literature review on leadership impact on innovation (summarized in Table 1) are measured against the servant leadership framework to identify overlap and alignment where empirical support exists for a particular servant leadership construct's positive impact on innovation. An exploration of H_1 is conducted by mapping the traits and behaviors with empirical support for their impact on innovation in Figure 1 to the matching servant leadership constructs in the proposed framework.

To effectively find alignment between servant leadership constructs and constructs of an innovative leader, it is necessary to identify an optimal servant leadership construct measure. Construct consensus is critical as a foundational framework for establishing grounded empirical support and sound empirical research methodology (Ploug &

Holm, 2015). Failing to reach a consensus on the constructs of a particular theory means that research findings and interpretations may suffer a lack of validity and reliability. Simply stated, construct consensus is the necessary foundation by which servant leadership researchers can uncover valid and reliable empirical data, build off existing theories, promote rigor in research, and reduce ambiguity in findings (Suddaby, 2014).

As Brown and Bryant (2016) displayed, construct consensus in the context of "the elephant" of servant leadership represents an obvious yet unspoken "elephant in the room" that researchers avoid addressing (p. 15). The landscape of constructs represents a wide range of conceptualizations that generate conceptual confusion (van Dierendonck, 2011). Brown and Bryant cited the work of Parris and Peachy (2013) who analyzed 39 studies to attempt to provide a cohesive narrative for how servant leadership works. The result was a flattened array of conceptual work in terms of characteristics, measurement development, and theoretical framework development. Scholars have continued to define and redefine servant leadership, further muddying the waters, while the preferred model depends on the opinion of the researcher (Brown & Bryant, 2016). Despite this assertion, attempts to sort through current research and establish a cohesive constructs framework for servant leadership are critical as to establish a baseline for further measurement.

Spears (1998) provided researchers with a conceptual framework for understanding servant leadership and offered 10 foundational constructs that make the theory accessible and actionable, providing a clear framework for servant leadership development. These 10 attributes include *listening*, *empathy*, *healing*, *awareness*, *persuasion*, *conceptualization*, *foresight*, *stewardship*, *commitment to the growth of people*, and *building community*. However, these constructs may oversimplify complex leadership dynamics and prove challenging to measure and implement effectively. To reinforce an effective construct model for servant leadership, it is necessary to support this framework with additional evidence and measures.

Winston and Fields (2015) analyzed seven dimensions of servant leadership based on varying servant leadership constructs proposed by Page and Wong (2000), Sendjaya and Sarros (2002), Dennis and Bocarnea (2005), Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), and Liden et al. (2008). Each construct proposal posited varying types of leadership characteristics including values, skills, behavior, and personality traits. Due to the numerous alternative operationalizations, Winston and Fields were, therefore, challenged to develop their own leadership construct model. Their efforts resulted in the aggregation of 10 leader behaviors that seem to be essential to servant leadership.

- practices what they preach
- serves people without regard to their nationality, gender, or race
- sees serving as a mission of responsibility to others

- genuinely interested in employees as people
- understands that serving others is most important
- willing to make sacrifices to help others
- seeks to instill trust rather than fear or insecurity
- is always honest
- is driven by a sense of higher calling
- promotes values that transcend self-interest and material success

Chaudhry et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analytic review of servant leadership literature with the goal of providing a cohesive definition of servant leadership. From 160 studies of servant leadership included in their analysis, they found that the plurality of interpretations and definitions have led to limited consensus on the characteristics of a servant leader, and a heavy reliance on Greenleaf's seminal work to conceptualize the construct (Chaudhry et al., 2021, p. 65). To measure servant leadership against positive employee perceptions and attitudes, the researchers narrowed down from 74 leader-centric characteristics and identified the attributes of *humility*, *authenticity*, and *interpersonal acceptance* to be uniquely distinct to servant leadership.

Langhof and Güldenberg (2020) conducted a systematic literature review focusing on servant leadership antecedents that began by recognizing that some scholars express criticism toward multidimensional constructs; specifically, van Knippenberg and Sitkin's (2013) criticism that a wide range of conceptualizations are often developed without empirical support for the chosen dimensions. Despite this, Langhof and Güldenberg concluded that the thoroughness regarding content and psychometry of Liden et al.'s (2008) seven-dimensions model makes it an appropriate multidimensional construct to capture servant leadership. Liden et al.'s servant leadership model consists of *conceptual skills*, *empowering*, *helping subordinates grow and succeed*, *putting subordinates first*, *behaving ethically*, *emotional healing*, and *creating value for the community*.

In their model of servant leadership, Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) delineated between primary aspects of leadership behavior and secondary aspects of leadership attributes. Primary aspects include *empowerment*, *accountability*, *standing back*, *humility*, and *stewardship*; while secondary attributes consist of *authenticity*, *courage*, and *forgiveness*. This model was based on the variance in results for secondary aspects and is explained that these might rely on follower perceptions of a successful leader (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011, p. 263). Similarly, Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) cited the differences in the relationships between self (leader) and rater (follower) reports of servant leadership and perceptions of organizational effectiveness raise issues related to the perceptions of leadership effectiveness (p. 32). Dimensions Barbuto and Wheeler uncovered include *altruistic calling*, *emotional healing*, *wisdom*, *persuasive mapping*, and *organizational stewardship*.

Russell and Stone (2002) set out to develop a practical model of servant leadership, categorizing its constructs based on existing empirical support. Core constructs include *vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others*, and *empowerment*. These outcomes are reinforced by eleven key attributes: *communication, credibility, competence, stewardship, visibility, influence, persuasion, listening, encouragement, teaching*, and *delegation*. Additionally, these results are mediated by various preexisting organizational characteristics such as values, culture, practices, and politics, alongside employee attitudes.

Patterson (2003) addressed the need for a theoretical model of servant leadership and established servant leadership as a virtues-based theory driven by virtuous constructs possessed by the servant leader. These constructs include *agapao love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment*, and *service.*

Due to the diverse findings regarding servant leadership constructs, traits, and behaviors, it is necessary to combine servant leadership traits and behaviors into a single framework to effectively measure against innovative leadership findings. Based on the various traits, attributes, and behaviors brought forth by researchers, Table 2 represents a working model for servant leadership constructs.

Table 2

Servant Leadership Constructs Profile

Level	Trait/Attribute	Behavior and supporting constructs	Sources
I. Core self-concept and motivation	Stewardship	Practices stewardship; puts subordinates first; models behavior	Barbuto & Wheeler (2006); Liden et al. (2008); Russell & Stone (2002); Spears (1998)
	Empowerment	Empowering; helping subordinates grow and succeed	Langhof & Güldenberg (2020); Liden et al. (2008); Patterson (2003); Russell & Stone (2002); Spears (1998)
II. Foundational traits	Humility	Practices what they preach; demonstrates	Chaudhry et al. (2021); Patterson (2003); Spears

Level	Trait/Attribute	Behavior and supporting constructs	Sources
		humility and stewardship	(1998); Winston & Fields (2015)
	Authenticity	Is always honest; upholds integrity and trust	Chaudhry et al. (2021); Russell & Stone (2002); Spears (1998); Winston & Fields (2015)
	Interpersonal acceptance	Exhibits empathy, appreciation of others; Serves people without bias	Russell & Stone (2002); Spears (1998); Winston & Fields (2015)
III. Secondary Attributes	Vision	Promotes transcendent values; driven by a vision; demonstrates foresight	Patterson (2003); Russell & Stone (2002); Spears (1998); Winston & Fields (2015)
	Emotional healing	Provides emotional healing; advocates for community building	Barbuto & Wheeler; Liden et al. (2008); Spears (1998)
	Communication and encouragement	Exhibits strong communication, influence, and persuasion; encourages and teaches	Barbuto & Wheeler (2006); Russell & Stone (2002); van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011)

Servant Leadership constructs in Table 2 were first grouped into the core self-concept and motivations of the servant leader (Level 1). Level 1 aligns with literature on the basis of a servant leader's motivation, as rooted in how they perceive themselves, or their *self-concept* (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) used two distinct premises that drive who the servant leader is and what they do; the first premise being "I serve because I am the leader," and the second premise being "I am the leader because I serve" (p. 58). The second premise is rooted in a deep ambition to lead and be

at the top, while the second is rooted in altruistic stewardship and empowerment. In addition to being included as a core servant leadership construct, the development of a leader's self-concept as a servant may be enhanced by focusing on the characteristics of stewardship. Leaders who buy in to being accountable for the well-being of their followers possess the foundation necessary to move into servant leadership (Reinke, 2004; Spears, 1998). Leaders as stewards regard their followers as a "possession" that is entrusted to them to be elevated to their better potential (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002, p. 50). The constructs of communication, encouragement, and emotional healing are proposed as byproducts of the self-concept of stewardship, cascading from the desire to steward and empower the organization's followers.

The placement of *humility*, *authenticity*, and *interpersonal acceptance* as Level 2 core traits in servant leadership is deliberate and essential, serving as the bridge between foundational motivations and actionable behaviors. Humility, as Greenleaf (1977) noted, allows leaders to acknowledge their limitations and appreciate others' contributions, fostering a culture of trust and collaboration. Liden et al. (2008) contended authenticity involves leaders being true to themselves and maintaining honesty and transparency, creating environments of trust and integrity that encourage deep engagement from followers. Russell and Stone (2002) contended interpersonal acceptance entails understanding and accepting others without judgment, fostering a compassionate and empathetic leadership style. These traits are pivotal because they shape fundamental leader–follower interactions, ensuring that the motivations of stewardship and empowerment are grounded in trust-based relationships. Without these core traits, servant leadership would lack the relational foundation necessary for effective practice, making humility, authenticity, and interpersonal acceptance critical for bridging foundational motivations with practical leadership actions.

The Level 3 attributes—*vision*, *emotional healing*, *communication* and *encouragement*—can be defined as the "operationalization" of effective servant leadership. Vision enables the servant–leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences of a decision for the future (Spears, 1998). Servant leaders see a better future for their organization and their followers, and their goals flow seamlessly between the two (Reinke, 2004). Through emphasis on service and the ability to visualize a better future, servant leaders are well equipped to face any organizational challenges that await them. Emotional healing involves recognizing and addressing the emotional needs of followers and helping them overcome personal and professional challenges (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). This attribute builds on the core trait of interpersonal acceptance, extending it to active support and care. Effective communication, the ability to listen actively and articulate ideas clearly, fosters open dialogue and trust (Russell & Stone, 2002). It is a natural extension of authenticity and humility, as it relies on the leader's genuine and transparent engagement with followers. While critical, these traits are a manifestation of the leader's foundational

commitment to serving the team and their capacity to build trust and authentic relationships.

Results

Using the proposed servant leadership framework (see Table 2), an analysis was conducted to map the qualities of an innovative leader (see Table 1) to the qualities of a servant leader. The first analysis approach involved coding each data entry from Table 1 so that each source (row) was assigned a unique code to facilitate precise mapping to findings in Table 2. These codes were systematically mapped to corresponding servant leadership constructs based on their relevance to specific traits and behaviors noted in the empirical findings. The mappings were documented comprehensively, appending empirical codes as footnotes in the original document to provide traceable evidence supporting each construct. Table 3 represents the output of the mapping exercise, with the "Sources" column noting the evidence from Table 1 supporting the constructs proposed in Table 2.

Table 3

Servant Leadership Constructs Profile (Mapped with Codes From Table 1)

Level	Trait/Attribute	Behavior and supporting constructs	Literature review entries
I. Core self-concept and values	Stewardship	Practices stewardship; puts subordinates first; models behavior	S2
	Empowerment	Empowers; helps subordinates grow and succeed	S3, S4, S10, S12, S14, S15, S19, S36, S37
II. Foundational traits	Humility	Practices what they preach; demonstrates humility and stewardship	S12
	Authenticity	Is always honest; upholds integrity and trust	S1, S3, S4, S31

Level	Trait/Attribute	Behavior and supporting constructs	Literature review entries
III. Secondary attributes	Interpersonal acceptance	Exhibits empathy and appreciation of others; serves people without bias	S1, S12
	Vision	Promotes transcendent values; driven by a vision; demonstrates foresight	S2, S19, S36
	Emotional healing	Provides emotional healing; advocates for community building	S17, S18, S36
	Communication and encouragement	Exhibits strong communication, influence, and persuasion; encourages and teaches	S2, S4, S5, S9, S19

The result of our analysis finds empirical evidence supporting H_1, though to varying degrees of significance. Constructs with the highest degree of support include the core value of *empowerment* (x9), attributes of *communication* and *encouragement* (x5), and foundational traits of *authenticity* (x4). Multiple layers of support are found for the attributes of *vision* (x3) and *emotional healing* (x3). Foundational traits of *interpersonal acceptance* (x2), *humility* (x1), and core self-concept of *stewardship* (x1) find some empirical support as well.

Amongst the total body of literature on the topic of leadership impact on innovation, there are 16 distinct studies that provide evidence supporting H_1. Among these studies, the innovation type of IWB was highly significant with nine distinct studies finding support for H_1, followed by technological innovation with four studies and OIP with three.

Discussion

The results highlighted in Table 3 represent a critical first step in exploring the impact of servant leadership on innovation, providing traceable evidence supporting the constructs as effective in achieving innovation. The findings of this study highlight the central role of *empowerment* in achieving organizational innovation. Research describes the role of empowerment in achieving innovation as one that seeks to utilize knowledge

sharing, political skills, social capital, and core self-evaluation to help the followers of an organization grow and succeed. This construct embodies the operationalization of a servant leader's core self-concept as a *steward* of the organization's followers.
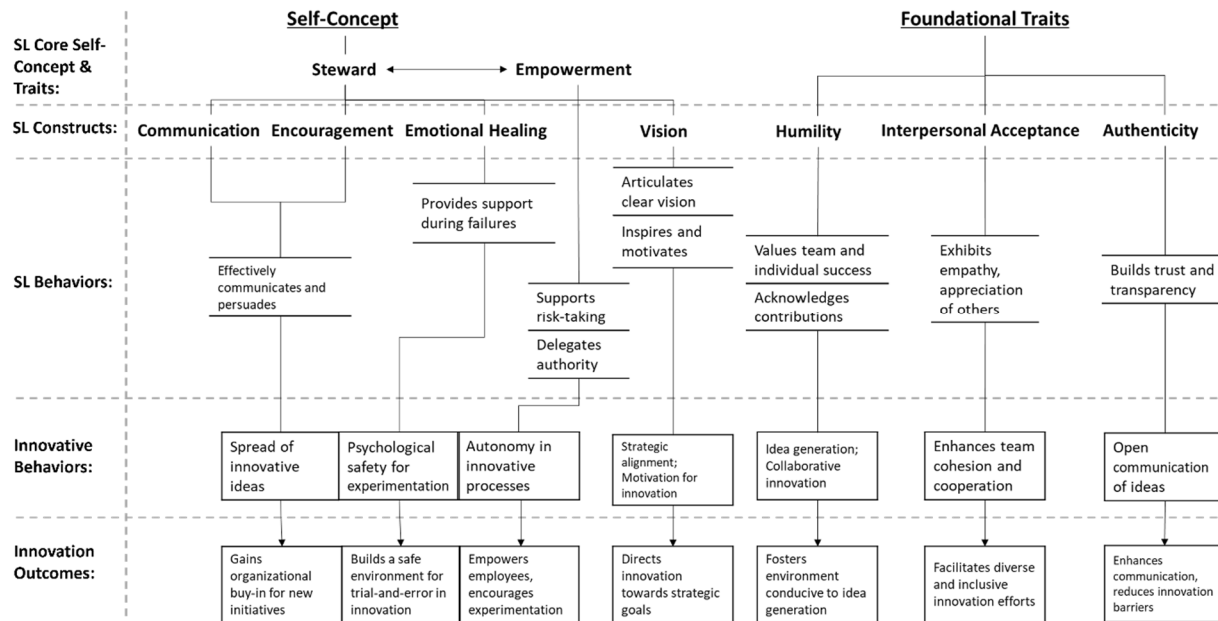
Communication and *authenticity* also find significance in their role in achieving organizational innovation. Effective communication ensures that ideas are shared, refined, and implemented efficiently. Authenticity, on the other hand, builds trust among followers. When leaders are genuine and transparent, they create a safe environment where employees feel valued and confident to share their ideas. Together, these constructs act as direct tools to help build an innovative culture within an organization. *Vision* is highlighted as playing a crucial role in achieving foresight and battling external factors and environmental headwinds. Visionary leaders provide direction and clarity, aligning the organization's efforts towards common innovative goals. *Emotional healing* is significant in the context of community building and teamwork. Leaders who provide emotional support and advocate for the well-being of their employees create a positive organizational climate. This supportive environment enhances collaboration and collective problem solving, which are vital for sustained innovation.

The innovation type most correlated with servant leadership is IWB. This result is unsurprising, given its employee-centric focus, aligning closely with the servant leader's emphasis on prioritizing employees first. IWB encompasses the actions of individuals or teams directed toward the initiation and application of new ideas, products, processes, or procedures in the workplace. Servant leaders, by nurturing and empowering their followers, create conditions conducive to IWB, thereby driving the overall innovative performance of the organization.

The findings from this study highlight the need for a comprehensive framework that maps these servant leadership constructs to specific innovative behaviors and outcomes. Such a framework would provide a structured approach to understanding how servant leadership traits and behaviors directly influence different types of innovation within organizations. Based on the mapping results from Table 3, Figure 1 represents a proposed theoretical framework that traces the servant leadership constructs to innovation outcomes.

Figure 1

Servant Leadership and Innovative Outcomes Framework

	Self-Concept				Foundational Traits		
SL Core Self-Concept & Traits:	Steward ⟷ Empowerment						
SL Constructs:	Communication	Encouragement	Emotional Healing	Vision	Humility	Interpersonal Acceptance	Authenticity
SL Behaviors:	Effectively communicates and persuades	Provides support during failures	Supports risk-taking; Delegates authority	Articulates clear vision; Inspires and motivates	Values team and individual success; Acknowledges contributions	Exhibits empathy, appreciation of others	Builds trust and transparency
Innovative Behaviors:	Spread of innovative ideas	Psychological safety for experimentation	Autonomy in innovative processes	Strategic alignment; Motivation for innovation	Idea generation; Collaborative innovation	Enhances team cohesion and cooperation	Open communication of ideas
Innovation Outcomes:	Gains organizational buy-in for new initiatives	Builds a safe environment for trial-and-error in innovation	Empowers employees, encourages experimentation	Directs innovation towards strategic goals	Fosters environment conducive to idea generation	Facilitates diverse and inclusive innovation efforts	Enhances communication, reduces innovation barriers

Conclusion

In the realm of organizational leadership, the prevailing discourse predominantly revolves around the actions leaders should take to foster innovation. Traditional leadership models, such as transformational and transactional leadership, emphasize the significance of leaders influencing their followers to drive organizational change and achieve innovation. These models focus on the tactical implementations and strategic decisions leaders must make to cultivate an innovative culture within their organizations. While these approaches highlight the importance of leader-driven change, they often place the onus on the leader to steer the organization toward innovative outcomes.

This article, however, takes a unique stance by shifting the focus from what leaders should do to who they should be. Instead of merely outlining the strategies and actions that leaders must undertake to spur innovation, this study delves into the intrinsic characteristics and traits that define an innovative leader. By concentrating on the dispositional attributes of leaders, the article seeks to uncover the fundamental qualities that inherently predispose leaders to foster innovation.

The literature review conducted within the article examines a diverse range of leadership styles, including transformational, transactional, ethical, ambidextrous, and entrepreneurial leadership. While these styles each contribute uniquely to fostering

innovation, they share a common thread: the emphasis on the leader's role in driving change and motivating followers. Transformational leadership, for instance, relies heavily on the leader's ability to inspire and intellectually stimulate their followers, while transactional leadership hinges on the leader's capacity to reward and manage followers' performance.

However, the article highlights that one leadership style, servant leadership, stands apart from the rest. Unlike other leadership models that prioritize organizational goals and use followers as means to achieve these ends, servant leadership places the followers' needs and development above all else. Servant leaders prioritize the growth, well-being, and empowerment of their followers, creating a supportive environment where innovation can naturally thrive. This follower-centric approach shifts the leadership paradigm from a top-down exercise of influence to a bottom-up approach where leaders exist primarily to serve and uplift their employees.

The empirical evidence presented in the article underscores the effectiveness of servant leadership in achieving positive innovation outcomes. By fostering a culture of trust, collaboration, and empowerment, servant leaders enable their followers to engage in creative problem-solving and innovative behaviors. This study uniquely contributes to the body of literature by proposing a framework that maps servant leadership constructs to specific innovative behaviors and outcomes, offering a structured approach to understanding how servant leadership traits and behaviors directly influence innovation.

In conclusion, this article is distinctive in its approach as it shifts the focus from the actions leaders must take to who they should inherently be. It posits that the essence of an innovative leader lies in their dispositional characteristics, and among the various leadership styles, servant leadership emerges as the most effective in placing followers' needs at the forefront. This people-centric leadership style deserves closer examination as a model for fostering sustainable innovation and organizational success.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study has a few notable limitations. First, this study is reliant on theoretical links supporting core servant leadership constructs and their positive influence on innovation. Future studies should focus on empirical evidence to support the theory proposed in H_1.

Additionally, the measurement framework used for servant leadership is unique to this study and has yet to be empirically tested. A review of the literature on servant leadership constructs reveals very little in terms of consensus. These findings suggest the need for researchers to reach a universally agreed-upon servant leadership framework as a basis for future empirical study. Developing more refined and

empirically validated measures of these constructs is essential for accurately assessing their direct and indirect effects on various types of organizational innovation. By focusing on these constructs, researchers can provide a clearer picture of how servant leadership influences innovation at different levels within an organization.

Researchers should also consider how servant leadership can be integrated with other leadership styles, such as transformational or transactional leadership, to maximize innovation outcomes. As highlighted by the emergence of ambidextrous leadership, hybrid models that combine elements of different leadership styles may offer a more nuanced understanding of how various traits and behaviors interact to foster innovation. Such models can provide practical insights into developing comprehensive leadership frameworks that leverage the strengths of multiple leadership approaches.

The organizational context and environmental factors also play a crucial role in moderating the relationship between servant leadership and innovation. Researchers should study how factors such as industry type, organizational size, and market dynamics influence this relationship. Understanding these moderating factors can help tailor leadership development programs to meet the specific needs of different organizations, enhancing the overall effectiveness of servant leadership in promoting innovation. Future research should seek to flesh out the framework by including notable external variables that impact innovation such as environmental dynamism, organizational learning, and cultural preferences for power distance (Cui et al., 2022; Hou et al., 2019; Iqbal et al., 2021; Rehman et al., 2019).

Practical Implications

The ability of organizations to innovate is crucial to stay competitive and adaptable in our fast-paced environment. The classical framework for achieving innovations in an organization typically places the onus of innovation on the organization's top leadership, while the rest of the organization follows in their footsteps. This model is inconsistent with research, however, which highlights the primary role of leadership in innovative processes is to mold and cultivate the organization's innovative culture and empowerment of the employees of the organization. Servant leadership emerges as a primary contender to fit the model of an innovative leader due to its distinct focus on supporting followers above all else. The intersection of servant leadership and innovation reveals a transformative approach to organizational success, challenging traditional leadership paradigms and redefining the pathways to achieving sustainable competitive advantage.

This study illuminates the profound impact that servant leaders, through their unique blend of humility, authenticity, stewardship, visionary leadership, interpersonal acceptance, emotional healing, communication, and empowerment can have on fostering an environment ripe for innovation. As organizations navigate the

complexities of a rapidly changing business landscape, the emphasis on servant leadership offers a compelling narrative: that true innovation flourishes not under the command of an influential leader but through the nurturing and empowerment of individuals.

Spears (1998) described the most common misconception when introducing the concept of servant leadership as the idea that managers will end up working for their followers, who end up making all decisions and acting as the organization's guide, and lead into a situation where the "inmates were running the prison" (p. 22). Spears cleared up this misconception by establishing that good leadership is a visionary role that seeks to provide direction. Leaders who are called to serve will seek to activate and enhance their followers' abilities and are gratified by seeing them win and grow (Patterson, 2003). In this structure, the leader provides direction through service and moves employees toward accomplishing their own goals. Ehrhart (2004) provided a metaphor of a rowboat to illustrate this radical approach to providing organizational direction. The person who sets the pace and guides the direction of the boat sits at the back. In the context of servant leadership, a commitment to a shared vision propels the organization forward, as opposed to strict enforcement from the front.

By prioritizing the growth and well-being of employees, servant leaders create a culture of trust, openness, and creativity, essential ingredients for continuous innovation. This people-centric approach not only drives individual and collective performance but also aligns organizational goals with ethical and sustainable practices, ensuring long-term success (Winston & Fields, 2015). As the empirical evidence continues to support the efficacy of servant leadership in promoting innovation, it becomes increasingly clear that the future of leadership lies in the hands of those who serve.

About the Author

Landon Meriweather is 29 years old and resides in Fayetteville, AR. He has worked as a digital marketing analyst at Tyson Foods and Acxiom. He completed the Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership with a focus on servant leadership in July 2024. His interest in servant leadership is rooted in a desire to challenge corporate norms, where soft skills and character development are often overlooked. His career and scholastic interests are focused on uncovering the source of effective change, focusing on who a person is and should be, rather than simply what they should do.

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