

# Clarifying Leadership: High-impact Leaders in a Time of Leadership Crisis

Franco GANDOLFI<sup>1</sup>  
Seth STONE<sup>2</sup>

## **Abstract**

*Leadership has become an increasingly difficult, complex, and multi-faceted topic in today's globalized world. New questions and challenges continue to emerge with regard to the most effective style of leading organizations and people through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. While leadership may be seen as one of the most over-researched topics, it remains one of the most misunderstood business phenomena of our time. This conceptual research paper addresses various leadership definitions, presents an operational definition of leadership based on five criteria, categorizes and showcases some of the known attributes of highly effective leaders, and builds a case for servant leadership. The paper posits that, despite a myriad of available leadership styles and methods that have emerged, servant leadership, a philosophical position based upon the leader serving first, may have the capacity to generate positive outcomes for all stakeholders involved.*

**Keywords:** *leadership, leadership styles, servant leadership, effectiveness*

**JEL classification:** M12, M14

## **Introduction**

Leadership has become an increasingly difficult, complex, and multi-faceted topic in today's globalized society. New questions and challenges continue to emerge with regard to the most effective or “best” style of leading organizations and people through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, often bringing decreased clarity to the leadership discussion. A key driving force behind this effect is the fact that the leadership literature has concerned itself primarily with the exploration of the outcomes and consequences of the different leadership styles and techniques (Gregory, Moates, & Gregory, 2011). What this ‘reality’ fails to take into consideration is that there is no universally recognized definition of leadership.

The study of leadership is not new; leadership research has been in existence for decades, if not centuries. In fact, leadership may be one of the most over-

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<sup>1</sup> Franco GANDOLFI, Georgetown University, francogandolfi@hotmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Seth STONE, Regent University, sethmstone@gmail.com

researched topics of our time. At the same time, leadership may also be one of the least understood phenomena, thereby perplexing scholars and consultants alike. As seen by the plethora of leadership definitions, it appears likely that the academic community will not reach a consensus on the definition of leadership in the foreseeable future. Some even contend that leadership is not an academic discipline *per se*, noting that research concerning the topic is housed in a multitude of academic fields, including education, psychology, sociology, theology, and the traditional social sciences.

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to have a meaningful discourse on leadership and leadership styles and outcomes without an operational definition of leadership. Further, it is foundationally paramount to understand the research that demonstrates the attributes of an effective leader. Without these fundamental pieces in place, it becomes virtually impossible to define the purpose and set goals for leadership development and growth, making the outcomes of any adopted leadership style far less valuable to leaders and organizations.

Accordingly, the purpose of this research article is to briefly review several definitions of leadership, supply an operational definition of leadership, and demonstrate some of the known attributes of highly effective leaders. The objective is to use this foundational information to begin building the case for servant leadership as a desirable and seemingly effective style for leading organizations successfully.

The article begins by examining the importance and significance of leadership. It then presents and unpacks some well-established definitions of leadership followed by a discussion of the known attributes of effective leaders. This is followed by a macro overview of different leadership styles, including a comparison of different styles relevant to this discussion of the stated definition of leadership and the key attributes of successful leaders, and featuring a more in-depth look at the foundations of servant leadership. The article concludes with a call for future leadership research.

## **1. The Importance of Leadership**

Virtually all of the published work on leadership, both academic and popular press, will tell the reader that leadership is important - whether that is done explicitly or implicitly. While researchers can generate some discussion and attempt to reach consensus on that issue, that is not the purpose here. The core question raised is this: is leadership important? If so, how and why? Unmistakably, leadership that is ineffective or lacking altogether occurs far too often and, as a result, people, organizations, communities, and even entire societies are adversely affected. Relatively recent high profile cases of the devastating effects of leadership ‘failures’ in North America have been well documented, including Ken Lay of Enron, Dennis Kozlowski of Tyco, and the infamous Bernie Madoff Ponzi scheme. More recent examples include the much publicized FIFA leadership crisis and even most recently, the clear lack of leadership at the Olympic Games in Brazil evidenced by

leadership failure both by the athletes who represented their countries, and the local leadership, who many feared would not be able to protect athletes from a city riddled with crime and instability. Yet, despite the many lessons learned from incidents such as these - including a greater emphasis on individual morals, corporate ethics, and an increased regulatory environment globally - leadership problems persist. For example, in 2015, it was discovered that former Volkswagen CEO Martin Winterkorn, a corporate leader with an already documented poor reputation, pleaded guilty in the firm's unethical and illegal practices through the installation of software that failed to accurately report emissions on its vehicles (Dishman, 2015). Highly publicized cases like these have proliferated, which is not surprising considering the research that has demonstrated that poor leadership is pervasive and systemic. Indeed, a recent Gallup study that studied the relationships between employees and their managers found that of 7,200 people surveyed who left their jobs, roughly half did so because of a bad manager (Snyder, 2015). This insight demonstrates that poor leadership can exist anywhere and could even be characterized as ubiquitous. In organizations ranging from *Fortune 500* companies to small entrepreneurial enterprises, poor leadership has shown to have profound effects on all societal stakeholders.

What a review and discussion of these 'failures' suggests is that there is an inherent and acute leadership crisis. This crisis is not just limited to one industry, sector, or nation; it is a global epidemic affecting businesses, governments, and NGOs alike. Yet, despite this insight and the resulting substantive increase in anecdotal and scientific leadership work, it does not appear that the academic and business communities have provided solutions, clear answers, or deep insights into the most effective styles and methods of leadership. Unequivocally, what we do know is that poor leadership has profound consequences – it is organizationally stifling, economically crippling, and has the capacity to destroy individuals and their families. Thus, there is some urgency in the uncovering of the most desirable and effective leadership methods.

Leadership relates to how a leader chooses to lead and how his or her behavior impacts an organization and its people. It has been asserted that all important social accomplishments require complex group efforts and, thus, leadership and followership are both necessary in the pursuit of a common purpose (Chaleff, 2009). Most great things that are built with any degree of sustainability are not a one-person effort; they require routine engagement and interaction from all types of people. Thus, leaders are forced to emerge, but as the authors of this paper attempt to uncover, the type of leaders that rise to the top of a hierarchy and the adopted leadership style can be the difference between success and failure in an organizational setting.

It has been said that the leading and managing of people is time consuming. Davila, Epstein, and Shelton (2006) state that the most important aspect of business is people, and business is mainly about managing people. While not a new observation, this reality may hold true for any type of organization. Indeed, the development and provision of products, processes, or services require the

involvement of people. If the people involved in those facets of an organization are what ultimately drive success, it becomes critical for the 'right' type of leader and the 'right' style of leadership to emerge. It is acknowledged that there is an ongoing discussion surrounding the differences and similarities between the concepts of leadership and management. For the purposes of this research paper, these terms are used interchangeably. A deeper discussion between leadership and management is beyond the scope of this paper.

Regardless of any distinction between managers and leaders, both must deal with many of the same realities. Mertel & Brill (2015) state that the top three rungs of Maslow's hierarchy of needs - belonging, esteem, and self-actualization - are about employees' feeling valued to do their best work, make a difference, and be appreciated and respected by others for their contributions. This may highlight another reason as to why leadership is important. People who are being led want to be valued whether they verbally express it or not; while affirmation from peers is highly valuable, praise and recognition from direct supervisors and senior leaders is invaluable. In fact, employee reward is one of the top five catalysts for employee engagement globally (Taneja, Sewell, & Odom, 2015). Employee reward does not always equal a pay raise in this new economy, often it simply means praise from leadership in one form or another. It can thus be concluded that effective leadership both recognizes and acts upon these human needs consistently.

Finally, from an organizational perspective, without clearly drawn maps to the future, an organization tends to be hamstrung by the past (Miller, 1995). Every organization has a mission, this is, its core purpose, reason for existence, and identity. Organizations must also have a clear vision, a strategic direction the leader is responsible for casting. To accomplish mission and vision there must be a set of core values, the guiding beliefs of an organization. These critical elements, both foundational and strategic, must come from and be upheld by the leadership of the organization.

While some of the components presented in this section could be expanded, the elements surrounding the importance of leadership provide a high level context for why scholars need to identify an operational definition for leadership and identify as to what constitutes effective leadership. This will be presented in the following two sections respectively.

## **2. Defining Leadership**

The topic of leadership has interested writers for centuries, ranging from the early Greek philosophers like Plato and Socrates to today's army of management and leadership self-help gurus whose books fill bookshops and whose articles flood the World Wide Web. Rarely, however, has the need for effective leadership been voiced more strongly than at the present time. Despite the recognition of the importance of leadership, there remains a mystery as to what leadership is and what it entails. In a review of leadership research, Stogdill (1974) concluded that there are

almost as many definitions as there are persons that have attempted to define it. That was 42 years ago!

Northouse (2007) contends that there are many ways to finish the sentence “Leadership is...” (p. 2). This underlines the inherently perplexing element of leadership and as the current body of research surrounding the subject has expanded in both size and scope. In fact, the leadership spectrum has broadened almost exponentially, ranging from slogans such as ‘leaders lead’ to overly complex and rigorous scientific explanations. So where on the spectrum should we focus? While it is impossible to bring consensus to this question, as noted above, for organizations to do great things their leaders must invest tremendous amounts of time into the people of the organization. This activity ranges from fulfilling people’s basic needs to setting a future vision that gives organizational members meaning and purpose as to their involvement and pursuit. Therefore, leadership is holistic in any organizational setting. It is with that understanding that the authors of this paper selected a viable leadership definition.

A review of the existing definitions of leadership produced several alternatives, including ones from prominent leaders such as former U.S. President Harry Truman who said, “*My definition of a leader . . . is a man who can persuade people to do what they don't want to do, or do what they're too lazy to do, and like it.*” Similarly, the U.S. Air Force embraces the view that “*Leadership is the art of influencing and directing people in such a way that will win their obedience, confidence, respect, and loyal cooperation in achieving common objectives.*” While these definitions seem intuitive and represent a good starting point for discussion, they fail to meet the holistic requirements of what the authors of this paper seek in a comprehensive leadership definition.

The adopted definition for the purpose of this research paper was based upon Gandolfi’s (2016) recommendation that an operational definition of leadership requires five components; (i) there must be one or more leaders, (ii) leadership must have followers, (iii) it must be action oriented with a legitimate (iv) course of action, and there must be (v) goals and objectives.

“A leader is one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization’s mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives.” (Winston & Patterson, 2006, p. 7)

### **3. Attributes of Effective Leadership**

There is no shortage of information and advice for business managers who desire to grow in their leadership. What are the attributes of effective leadership? Much of the published and readily available leadership knowledge tends to be anecdotally-oriented rather than rooted in academic research (Allio, 2012). While this is a skeptical position to take, there is strong evidence to suggest that much of

the published business and leadership research is housed with the popular press literature. By contrast, in order to identify and showcase the known leadership attributes that are deemed as ‘successful’ or ‘effective’, the authors of this paper have relied upon studies grounded in empirical research.

Two principles form the foundation for the material that follows. First, all people have the capacity to form leadership relationships providing that they understand that its starting point is self-realization (Wills, 2011). Thus, effective leadership rarely occurs when there is a lack of self-awareness and emotional intelligence (Wills, 2011). Second, leaders are *made* in that leadership development plays a significant role in the formation, growth, and development of leaders. Holberton (2004) states that leaders are like athletes in that some have more natural talent than others. Just as leaders and athletes need constant practice to develop their talents, effective leadership, regardless of style, requires continuous development and growth.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) provide some of the most authoritative and comprehensive research on effective leadership. These researchers have been compiling empirical data for more than three decades and continue to collect supporting evidence through the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) assessment. More doctoral dissertations have studied and validated their research findings than any other scientific evidence provided for attributes that render effective leadership.

Accordingly, Kouzes and Posner (2007) present five key attributes for effective leadership, that is, (i) model the way, (ii) inspire a shared vision, (iii) challenge the process, (iv) enable others to act, and (v) encourage the heart. The first attribute, to model the way, means to clarify the pertinent values of the organization, affirm shared ideals, and to lead by example (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Identifying shared values and creating tangible connections to actions helps to build the trust that is critical in leader/follower relationships. Schraeder (2009) asserts that “walking the talk” (p. 4) or undertaking actions that are consistent with statements that are made engenders a certain level of confidence or trust toward the concomitant individual or organization. Consistency builds confidence and gives the leader heightened credibility (Schraeder, 2009).

Two, inspiring a shared vision requires leaders to build a vision for the future that creates exciting possibilities, motivating organizational members to contribute and rally around shared ideals (Vito, Higgins, & Denny, 2014). This helps organization members see the link between the organization’s present state and its desired future state. Three, challenging the process is often the most misunderstood element of the five key leadership practices. According to Strang (2005), it refers to an empowerment of others to act by fostering collaboration and strengthening others. By challenging the process, a leader sends a message to the organization to never become complacent or too invested in the status quo. It also provides followers room to grow, linking closely to the development component of the definition of leadership this current research article provides (Strang, 2005).

Four, when leaders enable others to act, they get more people involved in the mission and the cause, resulting in an increased level of collaboration and trust

throughout organizations (Hage & Posner, 2015). This shows followers that they are valued and trusted, aligning with the basic human needs identified previously in the paper.

Five, to encourage the heart is to openly address and recognize contributions and find meaningful ways to have genuine celebration for accomplishment (Strang, 2005). Community can take many forms, but since leadership occurs in groups and not in a vacuum, facilitating and nurturing community is foundational to effective leadership. In his seminal work *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2001) points out the top leader as a Level-5-leader, defined as one who “builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will” (p. 20). When leaders encourage followers and recognize their contributions, it takes the spotlight off of the leader and displays a genuine sense of humility that is not characteristic and typical of many leadership styles that exist in today’s complex world.

In addition to the five attributes identified by Kouzes & Posner (2007), it is pertinent to introduce an additional element. Cabrera and Unruh (2012) posit a global mindset as critical to leadership success. They stipulate that leaders with significant global psychological capital have the cognitive ability to analyze situations from multiple, even competing, points of view. As such, leaders have a driving interest in learning about other people’s perspectives and are capable of suspending their own judgment in order to more subjectively understand a particular situation (Cabrera & Unruh, 2012). This does not infer that an effective leader must operate in different nations, although that does take place for a multitude of successful leaders. What Cabrera and Unruh (2012) seem to be referring to is a mindset where leaders remain open to views other than their own for consideration and potential implementation.

Interestingly, the common thread running throughout these characteristics for effective leaders appears to be that they are in place far more for the followers than they are for the actual leader. Given the adopted definition for leadership for the purpose of this article and the incredible amount of work it requires to implement each element of the definition, it is not surprising that many highly effective leaders are known to be humble and choose to put the needs of others before their own. Based on the empirical attributes presented of what makes an effective leader, it becomes important to briefly introduce the well-researched and validated leadership styles. This provides a foundation for building a case for servant leadership.

#### **4. Leadership Styles**

There is an ever-growing body of theories to explain the concept and practice of leadership. A brief literature survey shows that most theories view leadership as grounded in one or more of the following three perspectives; (i) leadership as a process or relationship, (ii) leadership as a combination of personality traits and characteristics, or (iii) leadership as certain behaviors or leadership skills. Most of the dominant theories maintain that, at least to some degree, leadership is a process that involves influencing individuals toward the

realization of goals. Leadership is a most dynamic and complex process, yet many of the published works appear to over-simplify the topic (Wren, 1995).

Unequivocally, there are a myriad of leadership styles that exist today and a large diversity of leadership types have been identified. While the management literature typically distinguishes between authoritative, participative, and laissez-faire leadership styles (Lewin, Lippit, & White, 1939), many other leadership styles and types have more recently emerged. Indeed, some of the ‘new’ styles — including but not limited to visionary, charismatic, authentic, team, distributed, and strategic leadership enjoy a positive status and connotation within the popular press and the wider business community.

A possible categorization of leadership styles may be based upon the following aspects – leadership grounded in the Trait Theory (i.e., people’s personality and cognitive qualities predispose them to success in leadership roles), Skills Theory (i.e., individuals’ knowledge and acquired skills are significant factors in the practice of effective leadership), Situational Theory (i.e., a particular situation determines the adopted leadership style), Contingency Theory (i.e., a leader’s effectiveness is contingent upon the leader’s style matching a situation), Path-Goal Theory (i.e., a leader’s ability to motivate followers showing them the path towards the attainment of desirable goals), Transactional Theory (i.e., focuses on the exchange and the leader’s setting of expectations and consequences), Transformational Theory (i.e., a leader’s ability to engage and connect with followers to reach individuals’ maximum potential), and, finally, the Servant Theory (i.e., the leader as a servant first).

It is beyond the scope of this publication to list and unpack each leadership style. However, the authors of this paper purport to build a case for a leadership style that has received some attention in recent years and which is believed to have the capacity to produce positive outcomes – servant leadership.

## **5. A Case for Servant Leadership**

This section seeks to establish that servant leadership is a desirable and potentially effective leadership style since, based upon the adopted definition of leadership and the attributes of effective leaders, this leadership style is associated with positive personal and organizational outcomes.

What exactly is servant leadership? Servant leadership, oxymoronic and arresting in nature, is seen as both a philosophy and set of practices. Interestingly, while traditional leadership often involves the accumulation, harnessing, and exercise of power at the top of an organizational hierarchy, the servant-leader purposefully shares power, places the needs of individuals first, and enables them to perform and grow. As with much of the leadership literature, the concept of servant leadership is not new. Indeed, the underlying philosophical positions transcend culture, tradition, and religious beliefs. Manifestations can be found in Christian leadership, with the Gospel of Mark frequently quoted in discussions, and in Tao Te Ching, an ancient Chinese text that is fundamental to both Taoism and Buddhism.



While servanthood is a timeless concept, the term “servant-leadership” was coined and popularized by Greenleaf (1996) who postulated that “the great leader is seen as servant first.” (p. 2). More eloquently, he stated that:

“It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit?” (Spears, 1996, p. 33).

Though servanthood has been considered morally virtuous in cultures from east to west for thousands of years, what Greenleaf provides in his explanation is counter-intuitive and opposed to many of the leadership styles that were popularized throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and still highly prevalent today, such as transactional leadership, situational leadership, and contingency theory just to name a few. Additionally, Greenleaf’s description of a servant leader is not leader-focused at all, but rather follower-focused, which makes it highly unique relative to other leadership styles. These two points make Greenleaf’s work significant and worthy of further exploration given the chosen definition and attributes of effective leaders that have been presented.

Contextually speaking, servant leadership is most likely associated with the participative leadership style. Interestingly, according to the managerial grid model (Blake & Mouton, 1964), participative-type leadership styles have shown to produce the highest levels of organizational performance and employee satisfaction.

Effective leaders are generally seen as highly motivated individuals with vision. Such visionary leaders are capable of prioritizing and communicating the needs of an organization, most notably during times of hardship where their effectiveness lies in creating a psychological safety net for those they lead (McDermott, Kidney, & Flood, 2011). This understanding would not seem to align with servant leadership at first glance. However, to provide a high degree of psychological safety, there must be a deep level of trust between leaders and followers, something servant leadership has the capacity to facilitate. Waddell (2006, citing Nyhan, 2000) explains that organizational trust is the particular level of confidence an individual has in a leader’s competence and his or her willingness to behave in ways that are ethical and fair. This construct also closely aligns with the servant leadership style.

Wiseman and McKeown (2010) note that some leaders drain intelligence and capability out of the people around them. As such, their focus is on their own intelligence and their resolve is to be the smartest person in the room, which has a diminishing effect on everyone else. Sadly, for them to look smart, other people have to end up looking dumb. Wiseman & McKeown (2010) continue to make the connection between this phenomenon and highly intelligent and driven individuals. Yet, this is the antithesis of servant leadership and the common perception of what effective leadership entails. The servant leadership style recognizes that organizational outcomes are the product of the collective work performed by

employees who must therefore be considered as critical stakeholders given their roles in driving productivity (Gutierrez-Wirsching, Mayfield, Mayfield, & Wang, 2015).

The concept of servant leadership is not without its critics. Some have criticized servant leadership from a social perspective, identifying it as either religious or anti-feminist (Eicher-Catt, 2005), while others have criticized it for remaining grounded in philosophical theory and lacking empirical substantiation (Patterson, 2003). Also, a major criticism of servant leadership is that it is believed to be soft, intangible, and ill-reflected on the bottom line of an organization. Conversely, Mertel and Brill (2015) suggest that there is a key to reframing how leaders view such soft intangibles, which is for leaders to consider how supporting and encouraging employees transcends to their personal and corporate values. In other words, a human connection takes place, which is a significant contrast to many other leadership styles. Such a human connection is actually the first step toward servanthood, which is walking a mile in the employees' shoes. From this behavior, leaders will often see an increase in employee engagement, which in turn often increases productivity. Once this mutual motivation is recognized, there is incentive to continue or even enhance a behavior that seems so counter-intuitive (Mertel & Brill, 2015), thus potentially bringing tangibility and bottom-line implications to something once thought to be intangible.

Therefore, the concept of servant leadership requires a different and in most cases new paradigm through which leaders see their organizations and, more importantly, the people in them. Framed another way, servant leadership is a paradox when contrasted with the more traditional views of leadership, whereby the leader leads others by serving the people in an organization and their needs (Patterson, 2003).

What does servant leadership look like? Leadership scholars have extracted the central tenets of servant leadership which include (i) service to others, (ii) a holistic approach to work, (iii) promoting a sense of community, and (iv) sharing of power in decision-making (Smith, 2005). In a similar vein, behavioral scientists have also determined the attributes of servant leadership which describe the outward, manifested characteristics of a servant-leader's leadership behavior. More importantly, however, theorists have examined the independent variables that actuate servant leadership behavior (Russell, 2001). In other words, what lies at the very core of the servant leader's philosophy? This is a pivotal question as the core shapes the characteristics of leaders which, in turn, impacts behavior, decision-making processes, and activities (Smith, 2005).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Recent corporate scandals, including the much publicized Volkswagen and FIFA leadership cases, have once again put the spotlight on the topic of leadership and the direct consequences of poor, toxic, or the complete absence of leadership on people, organizations, and entire communities. This paper has established that there

are inherent weaknesses in people exercising self-serving leadership, frequently manifested in errors of judgment, excessive pride, unhealthy leader-follower relationships, self-interested actions, and other deleterious outcomes. With traditional hierarchies flattening and the presence of position power slowly eroding in many organizations, effective leaders must derive their influence from elements other than formal, positional power. Sadly, despite decades of serious academic research concerning the topic, there is still no conclusive evidence of the potency and effectiveness of various leadership styles and methods. This begs the question as to whether it is conceivable that a leadership style based on an individual's core values proves superior to outcomes derived from positional, self-serving leadership? In other words, is it possible that positive influence is more important than exercising organizational authority? More work is needed to empirically study servant-type leadership as a leadership style that has the capacity to produce positive, sustainable consequences on people, organizations, and entire communities.

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