

The Social Field of Servant Leadership Development: A Grounded Theory Perspective

Simon Taylor

Graduate School of Business and Leadership
University Of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Keywords

Servant leadership, social field theory, leadership development, grounded theory, holistic leadership, community service, Bourdieu

Abstract

This study explores the processes through which a holistic leadership development program cultivates a personal philosophy and practice of servant leadership. Using a grounded theory approach, the research investigates how participation in the Hilton College Servant Leadership Development Programme (HCSLDP) influences the leadership trajectories of its alumni. The study draws on in-depth qualitative data from 36 former students who engaged in the program, employing Strauss and Corbin's (1990) paradigm model to analyse how various factors interact to shape the development of servant leadership attributes. The findings reveal that leadership opportunities within the program serve as critical catalysts in fostering servant leadership identity and practice. However, the impact of these experiences is contingent upon key intervening conditions, including interactions with influential mentors, the participants' self-concept, personal choices, and individual values. These factors collectively contribute to the internalization of servant leadership principles, emphasizing humility, service to others, and ethical decision-making. To further contextualize these findings, this study integrates Pierre Bourdieu's social field theory, providing a broader sociological perspective on leadership development. By examining the structured environments (fields) in which leadership growth occurs, the research highlights how habitus (deep-seated dispositions shaped by past experiences) and different forms of capital – social, cultural, and symbolic – interact to influence leadership outcomes. This theoretical lens allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate leadership development spaces and how the institutional and cultural contexts of these environments shape the assimilation of servant leadership values. The study's implications extend beyond Hilton College, offering insights into the design and implementation of leadership development initiatives across various educational and organizational settings. Specifically, it underscores the importance of structured leadership experiences that incorporate mentorship, reflective practice, and ethical decision-making. Additionally, it highlights the necessity of creating social environments that reinforce servant leadership principles, ensuring that leadership development efforts align with broader community and organizational values. By bridging grounded theory with social field theory, this research contributes to both leadership development scholarship and practical applications in educational and professional contexts. It offers a nuanced understanding of how servant leadership is cultivated, emphasizing the interplay between personal agency, structured experiences, and broader social influences in shaping ethical, community-oriented leadership practices.

Introduction

Leadership development has become a critical area of focus in education, business, and social organizations. Traditional leadership models often emphasize authority, control, and performance, whereas servant leadership prioritizes ethical decision-making, service to others, and community-oriented leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). As organizations seek to foster leadership that aligns with social responsibility and ethical governance, the need for programs that cultivate servant leadership has grown (Eva et al., 2019).

Despite its widespread recognition, there remains a gap in understanding how servant leadership is nurtured in real-world contexts. Specifically, how do leadership development programs shape the mindset, philosophy, and practice of servant leadership? How do social structures, personal agency, and institutional environments contribute to leadership formation (Taylor, 2013)?

This study aims to explore how a holistic, values-driven leadership development program fosters servant leadership identity and practice among young adults. Through a qualitative lens, it examines the

social and institutional mechanisms that influence servant leadership formation and offers insights into replicable structures and pedagogies that promote ethical leadership.

To guide this inquiry, the study is structured around the following research questions:

- How does participation in the Hilton College Servant Leadership Development Programme (HCSLDP) develop servant leadership attributes among alumni?
- How do structured leadership opportunities within HCSLDP shape participants' servant leadership identity and practice during and after the program?
- What role do mentorship, self-concept, personal values, and decision-making play in internalizing servant leadership principles?
- How can Bourdieu's social field theory explain how the HCSLDP's environment shapes participants' habitus and leadership dispositions?
- What are the implications of integrating grounded theory with Bourdieu's social field theory for designing and evaluating servant leadership programs in educational and organizational contexts?

To address these questions, the research applies grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), allowing for emergent conceptual development based on participants' narratives. In tandem, it draws from Bourdieu's (1986) social field theory to conceptualize how structured environments and symbolic systems mediate leadership formation. Within such fields, individuals' dispositions (habitus) and access to capital (social, cultural, symbolic) condition their participation and development as leaders (Taylor, 2013).

Taylor's (2013) grounded theory study of servant leadership at Hilton College offers a valuable foundation, revealing how mentorship, peer relationships, institutional rituals, and reflective practices converge to form a developmental ecology. This research builds on his insights by deepening the sociological analysis of leadership development and illustrating how field-specific dynamics translate into enduring leadership habitus.

The findings have broad implications for educational institutions, corporate training, and community leadership programs. By uncovering how servant leadership can be cultivated through intentional field design and social reinforcement, this study offers a model for developing ethical, relationally grounded leadership in diverse contexts.

Literature Review

Servant leadership was first introduced by Greenleaf (1977), who proposed that the most effective leaders are those who prioritize serving others before asserting their own authority. Unlike traditional leadership paradigms, which emphasize hierarchical control, servant leadership focuses on empowerment, ethical responsibility, and community building. According to Spears (1995), ten key characteristics of servant leadership include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building community. These principles foster environments where leaders serve first and lead second.

Liden et al. (2008) define servant leadership as a multidimensional construct comprising emotional healing, creating value for the community, empowering followers, putting subordinates first, and helping them grow and succeed. This contrasts with transactional leadership, which is more focused on short-term goal achievement and authority-based direction.

Empirical research has shown that organizations embracing servant leadership tend to exhibit higher employee satisfaction, ethical behaviour, and long-term sustainability (Hunter et al., 2013; Eva et al., 2019). Servant leadership also supports the formation of transformational cultures that value collaboration, trust, and shared purpose.

However, a continuing debate exists around whether servant leadership is an innate quality or a cultivated practice. Some scholars argue it arises from inherent traits (Van Dierendonck, 2011), while others propose that it can be nurtured through structured interventions such as mentorship, reflective learning, and intentional leadership programs (Sendjaya et al., 2008). This study seeks to contribute to this debate by analysing how structured leadership development programs – like the Hilton College Servant Leadership Development Programme (HCSLDP) – facilitate the embodiment of servant leadership values.

Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) is a qualitative methodology focused on the development of theory grounded in empirical data. It is particularly useful in leadership research because it allows

scholars to uncover underlying processes, patterns, and relationships within complex human systems (Kempster & Stewart, 2010). Grounded theory accommodates inductive reasoning, offering flexibility for theory emergence from within participant narratives.

Numerous studies have applied grounded theory in leadership contexts. Day and Dragoni (2015) emphasized that leadership identity formation is shaped by real-world experiences and relational feedback. Komives et al. (2005) proposed a developmental model of leadership, identifying a progression from awareness to integration of leadership identity, built through social interactions and experiential engagement.

This study applies grounded theory to understand how leadership identity is developed through the HCSLDP. By analysing how students interact with institutional values, peer expectations, and mentorship structures, it provides a grounded explanation of servant leadership formation.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) social field theory offers a powerful framework for examining leadership development within structured environments. Bourdieu conceptualizes the social world as composed of multiple fields—autonomous arenas where actors compete for various forms of capital and legitimacy. Within any field, an individual's actions are shaped by their habitus (internalized dispositions) and access to capital. Bourdieu (1986) identifies four primary forms of capital:

Economic capital: material resources and financial assets

Social capital: relationships and networks of influence

Cultural capital: educational background, language, and knowledge

Symbolic capital: prestige, recognition, and honour accrued through social valuation

In a leadership development field like HCSLDP, students enter with differing forms and levels of capital. Their habitus—shaped by background, values, and expectations—interacts with the program's institutional logic. Leadership development thus occurs not merely as personal growth, but as positioning within a symbolic field that rewards certain dispositions, behaviours, and values.

Taylor's (2013) grounded theory study of the Hilton College Servant Leadership Development Programme (HCSLDP) provides rich empirical evidence for how Bourdieu's social field theory applies to leadership formation. He describes the program as a structured field that mediates identity development through overlapping mechanisms—rituals, reflection, mentorship, and peer accountability.

In this field, leadership opportunities are symbolic transactions where students accumulate social capital (trust and influence), cultural capital (shared values of humility and service), and symbolic capital (public recognition and institutional affirmation). For example, taking on service projects or mentoring younger students is not only an act of leadership—it is a visible signal of alignment with institutional norms. Over time, repeated reinforcement of these behaviours cultivates a leadership habitus—a durable disposition toward ethical and relational action. Taylor (2013) further identifies four critical structures that shape this developmental process:

Peer engagement – micro-level interactions that support identity testing and reflection.

Mentorship – relationships that mediate access to insider knowledge and symbolic capital.

Community service – field-approved action that demonstrates leadership-in-practice.

Reflective practice – recursive sense-making that connects experience to evolving identity.

Taylor (2013) illustrates how students in the HCSLDP transform field-specific recognition into deeply ingrained values, echoing Bourdieu's (1986) assertion that social practices arise from the dynamic interaction of field, habitus, and capital. Within the structured environment of the program, servant leadership values are internalized, highlighting that leadership development is both influenced and bounded by the social fields individuals navigate. This process integrates institutional norms, personal dispositions, and access to cultural and symbolic capital, positioning servant leadership not merely as behaviour but as a field-dependent practice. It emerges through the continuous negotiation of identity, recognition, and alignment with sociocultural structures.

Recent empirical studies have emphasized the critical role of emotional intelligence (EI) in strengthening servant leadership outcomes. Dugo, Kant, and Alemu (2025) explored this dynamic through a structural equation model involving 385 academic staff from Ethiopian public universities. Their findings revealed that servant leadership significantly enhances organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and that EI plays a vital mediating role in this relationship.

These insights complement the grounded theory findings of this study by highlighting a measurable psychological mechanism—emotional intelligence—that supports the internalization and practice of servant leadership. While this paper focuses on qualitative narratives and social field dynamics, the integration of EI as a mediating variable adds psychological depth to the socio-cultural explanation of servant leadership identity formation. It suggests that programs like HCSLDP should also focus on developing emotional competencies alongside structural mentorship and cultural reinforcement.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design using grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The research aims to explore how the HCSLDP influences leadership development by analysing first-hand experiences of former participants.

Participants and Sampling

36 former students from Hilton College who participated in the HCSLDP were selected through purposive sampling.

Participants were chosen to represent a diverse range of leadership experiences, social backgrounds, and post-program leadership trajectories.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' leadership experiences, mentorship interactions, and reflections on servant leadership. Additional data sources included program documents, leadership reflections, and observational notes from leadership activities.

The data analysis followed the systematic grounded theory methodology as developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The aim was to construct a substantive theory explaining how the Hilton College Servant Leadership Development Programme (HCSLDP) influenced participants' development of a leadership philosophy and practice, particularly aligned with servant leadership.

Transcription and Data Familiarisation

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. This allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data. Initial readings were done to familiarise with the range and texture of participant experiences, focusing on leadership interactions, formative events, and personal reflections.

Open Coding

Using open coding, the data were broken down into discrete parts and examined line-by-line to identify and label emerging concepts. This involved:

- Assigning codes to meaningful segments of data.
- Grouping similar concepts into initial categories.
- Applying the constant comparative method: comparing incidents within the data to establish variation and consistency.

For example, codes such as "leading by example," "feeling valued," and "reflective journaling" were grouped under higher-order categories like servant leadership behaviour, affirmation, and self-reflection.

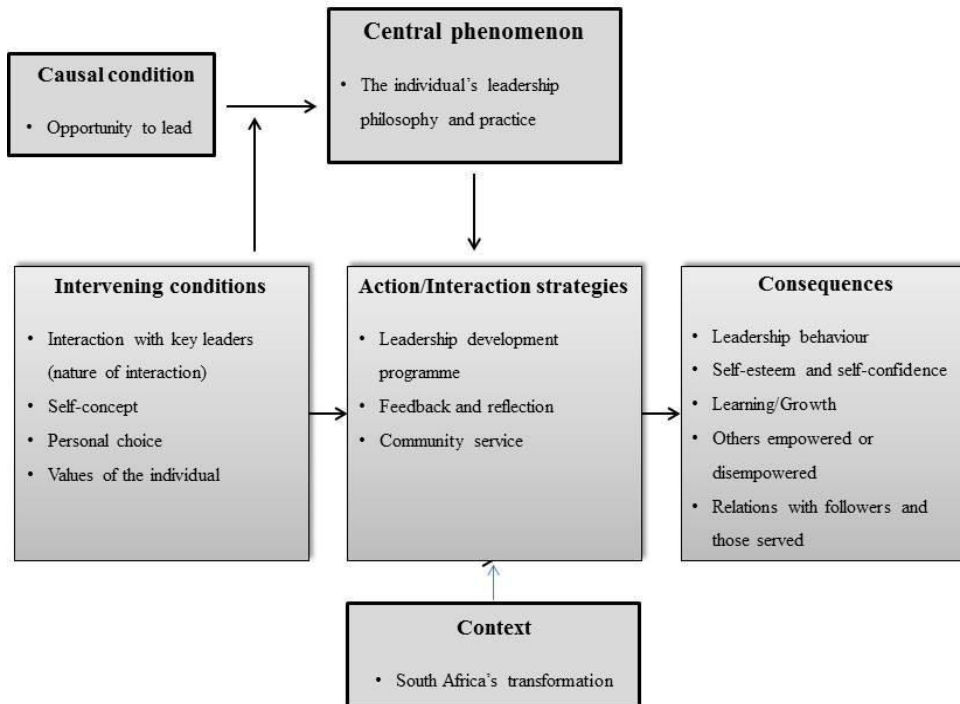
Axial Coding

Once open codes were saturated and refined, axial coding was employed to identify relationships between categories. This involved connecting:

- Causal conditions (e.g., opportunities to lead),
- Phenomenon (e.g., development of servant leadership philosophy),
- Context (e.g., school culture and support structures),
- Intervening conditions (e.g., peer dynamics, mentorship),
- Action/interaction strategies (e.g., program participation, self-reflection), and
- Consequences (e.g., increased self-confidence, ethical leadership behaviour).

This coding stage led to the development of a paradigm model that mapped the interconnections influencing leadership development.

Fig 1: Visual Display of the paradigm model



Source: Researchers own construction

Selective Coding

In the final phase, selective coding was used to identify the core category – the central phenomenon integrating all other categories. In this study, it was identified as the development of a personal leadership philosophy grounded in servant leadership principles.

Other categories were refined and integrated into a coherent narrative storyline that illustrated the theoretical framework. The storyline accounted for how internal motivations, experiential learning, social reinforcement, and institutional context coalesced to shape the leadership identities of participants.

Theoretical Saturation and Model Development

Analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached – when new data no longer added new properties or dimensions to the core categories. From this, a substantive theory of servant leadership development was developed, which was later tested against existing literature for theoretical validation (as recommended by Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Supporting Strategies

Memo writing: Used throughout to document emerging thoughts, category development, and analytical decisions.

Diagrams: Used to visualize relationships and track evolving insights (e.g., paradigm model, social field model).

Triangulation: Interview data were supported with leadership reflections, program documents, and observational notes to enhance credibility.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how servant leadership is cultivated within the structured environment of the Hilton College Servant Leadership Development Programme (HCSLDP). The analysis identifies four major themes:

- The role of leadership opportunities
- The influence of mentorship and social interactions

- Self-concept and personal choice
- The social field of leadership development

Each theme is supported by direct participant quotes, strengthening the validity of the findings.

The Role of Leadership Opportunities

One of the most critical factors shaping servant leadership development in the HCSDLDP is exposure to leadership opportunities. Participants consistently highlighted that their hands-on leadership experiences played a pivotal role in developing their leadership identity.

For example, several participants who served as student council representatives, sports captains, or community project leaders described how these roles taught them about accountability, teamwork, and service-oriented leadership. As one participant noted:

“Being given a leadership position forced me to think about others first. I had to make decisions not based on what was easiest for me, but what was best for the team.”

This supports the findings of Day and Dragoni (2015), which found that experiential learning is one of the most effective methods for developing leadership identity, but is a gradual process shaped by meaningful developmental experiences over time. Additionally, structured leadership experiences helped students develop problem-solving skills, ethical decision-making capabilities, and a stronger sense of social responsibility. Another participant shared:

“I used to think leadership was about being in charge, but through my role in community service projects, I realized leadership is about empowering and elevating others. That changed my entire perspective.”

This finding aligns with Komives et al. (2005), who argue that leadership development is a progressive process shaped by both experiential learning and structured leadership roles.

In essence, leadership opportunities provide a foundation for leadership development, reinforcing servant leadership values through practical experience and ethical decision-making (Day and Dragoni, 2015).

The Influence of Mentorship and Social Interactions

Mentorship emerged as a critical factor in shaping the participants’ leadership philosophies. The study found that interactions with teachers, senior leaders, and community mentors played an essential role in reinforcing servant leadership principles.

Many participants emphasized that their mentors modelled ethical leadership, humility, and service, which influenced their leadership approach. One participant shared:

“The best lessons I learned about leadership came from watching my mentors. They never told me to be a servant leader, they just lived it – and that inspired me to do the same.”

This finding aligns with Brown and Treviño (2014), who argue that ethical leaders play a key role in shaping emerging leaders by providing guidance, encouragement, and moral reasoning frameworks.

Moreover, participants described how peer interactions and leadership networks contributed to mutual learning and personal growth. One participant noted:

“In our leadership group, we always pushed each other to do better. When one of us struggled, we had conversations about what servant leadership meant in real life.”

This supports Hunter et al. (2013), who found that leadership development is enhanced when individuals engage in shared leadership experiences and peer mentorship. Servant leadership is strengthened through mentorship, with role models and peer interactions reinforcing ethical leadership principles.

Self-Concept and Personal Choice

Another significant theme that emerged from the data was the role of self-concept in leadership development. Participants emphasized that personal identity, values, and intrinsic motivation played a crucial role in shaping their commitment to servant leadership.

Several participants explained that engaging in reflective practices, leadership discussions, and personal goal-setting exercises helped them develop a clearer leadership philosophy. One participant shared:

“The leadership program made me reflect on who I wanted to be as a leader. It wasn’t just about skills—it was about deciding what kind of leader I wanted to become.”

This finding supports Lord and Hall (2005), who argue that self-concept plays a crucial role in leadership identity formation.

Furthermore, personal choice was a decisive factor in whether individuals embraced servant leadership over other leadership styles. Some participants admitted that while they were exposed to servant leadership principles, they ultimately had to make a conscious decision to adopt them in their leadership practice.

As one participant reflected:

“I had to make a choice: lead for personal success, or lead in a way that benefits the community. Although it wasn’t an easy choice at first, I can no longer imagine leading any other way.” Servant leadership development is deeply tied to self-concept and personal choice, highlighting the importance of self-reflection and value-based leadership training.

The Social Field of Leadership Development

Integrating Bourdieu’s social field theory (1986) into the analysis provides additional insights into how leadership development is shaped by structured environments. The study found that institutional culture, social expectations, and leadership norms played a significant role in shaping servant leadership outcomes.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus—internalized dispositions shaped by past experiences—helps explain why students from different social backgrounds approached leadership differently. Some participants who came from service-oriented families found it easier to adopt servant leadership values, while others had to actively learn and internalize these values through the program.

As one participant noted:

“I grew up in a household where leadership meant power. It took me a while to shift my thinking and see leadership as service instead.”

Additionally, different forms of capital—social, cultural, and symbolic—affected leadership development outcomes:

Social capital: Leadership opportunities were more accessible to students who had strong social networks and mentorship connections.

Cultural capital: Leadership identity was reinforced by the school’s culture, values, and expectations, shaping how students internalized servant leadership.

Symbolic capital: Participants who demonstrated strong servant leadership values gained recognition and credibility within the school community.

These findings support Golsorkhi et al. (2009), who argue that leadership identities are shaped by institutional fields and structured social environments. Servant leadership does not develop in isolation; rather, it is shaped by institutional norms, cultural expectations, and social capital.

Implications and Recommendations

This study advances the discourse on leadership development by synthesizing Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory methodology (1990), Taylor’s (2013) leadership development framework, and Bourdieu’s social field theory to provide a deeply contextual, sociologically informed model of servant leadership internalization. The findings extend beyond the context of Hilton College in several meaningful ways:

- **Contribution to Educational Leadership Development**

The framework developed in this study offers a replicable model for other educational institutions seeking to cultivate ethical, reflective, and service-oriented leaders. The emphasis on mentorship, experiential learning, and reflective practice aligns with contemporary pedagogies in leadership education. Schools and universities can adapt the model to their unique contexts to nurture leadership qualities that prioritize empathy, accountability, and collective well-being. Leadership programs in both secondary and tertiary education sectors can use the paradigm to embed servant leadership values in institutional culture, bridging character education with formal leadership development.

- **Influence on Corporate Leadership Training**

The study’s model contributes to the growing interest in servant leadership within corporate settings, particularly in human-centred leadership and ethical business practices. Its emphasis on internalised

values, social conditioning, and mentorship has relevance for leadership pipelines in business, where employee engagement, moral responsibility, and long-term vision are increasingly prioritized. Corporates can use the framework to structure mentorship programs and leadership tracks that emphasize values-based leadership, especially in organizations navigating ethical, social, or generational transitions.

- **Application in Nonprofit and Civil Society Sectors**

Servant leadership as articulated in this research resonates strongly with the mission-driven ethos of nonprofit organizations. The grounded theory developed here underscores how leadership is not only taught but socially shaped—a key insight for organizations working in community leadership, grassroots activism, or global development. NGOs and social enterprises can use the insights from this study to design youth development programs or community leadership initiatives that prioritize service, empathy, and empowerment from the ground up.

- **Theoretical Advancement**

The integration of Bourdieu's field, habitus, and capital with grounded theory generates a hybrid lens for analysing how leadership identities are both structured and self-constructed. This sociological re-framing deepens our understanding of how leadership development is embedded in power relations, cultural expectations, and institutional histories. This interdisciplinary approach offers scholars a new methodological and theoretical model for studying identity formation in other social fields—such as medicine, law, politics, or sport—where leadership and service intersect.

Directions for Future Research

Cross-Contextual Validation

Future studies could test the grounded theory model in other elite and non-elite educational settings, both within South Africa and internationally, to explore how context shapes servant leadership development.

Longitudinal Studies

Tracking participants over a longer period could deepen insights into the durability and evolution of servant leadership traits and how they manifest in different life stages and career contexts.

Comparative Sector Studies

Applying this model to corporate, nonprofit, or government leadership programs would help to identify sector-specific adaptations and highlight common sociocultural influences on leadership identity.

Intersectional Perspectives

Further research should explore how race, gender, and socioeconomic status intersect with access to and experience of servant leadership development. This is particularly relevant in post-apartheid South Africa and other stratified societies.

Quantitative Extensions

While grounded theory offers rich qualitative insights, mixed-methods research using validated leadership inventories could test the generalizability and correlational strength of the categories and relationships identified in this study. This broader framing makes clear that the study is not simply about Hilton College—it's about how leadership can be cultivated as an ethical, socially embedded practice across diverse contexts.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Brown, M. E., & Treviño, L. K. (2014). Do ethical leaders get ahead? Exploring ethical leadership, leader effectiveness, and promotability. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 24(1), 151–176
- Day, D. V., & Dragoni, L. (2015). Leadership development: An outcome-oriented review based on time and levels of analysis. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 2(1), 133–156.
- Dugo, D., Kant, S., & Alemu, Z. K. (2025). Servant leadership influence on organizational citizenship behaviour with the mediation role of emotional intelligence: A case of public universities in Ethiopia. In *Alpha and Next Generation Leadership Studies* (pp. 128–145).
- Eva, N., Robin, M., Sendjaya, S., van Dierendonck, D., & Liden, R. C. (2019). Servant leadership: A systematic review and call for future research. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(1), 111–132.

- Golsorkhi, D., Leca, B., Lounsbury, M., & Ramirez, C. (2009). Social fields and institutional change. *Organization Studies*, 30(8), 927-944.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Paulist Press.
- Hunter, E. M., Neubert, M. J., Perry, S. J., Witt, L. A., Penney, L. M., & Weinberger, E. (2013). Servant leaders inspire servant followers: Antecedents and outcomes for employees and the organization. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 24(2), 316-331.
- Kempster, S., & Stewart, J. (2010). Becoming a leader: A co-produced autoethnographic exploration of situated learning of leadership practice. *Management Learning*, 41(2), 205-219.
- Komives, S. R., Owen, J. E., Longbeam, S. D., Mainella, F. C., & Osteen, L. (2005). Developing a leadership identity: A grounded theory. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(6), 593-611
- Liden, R. C., Panaccio, A., Meuser, J. D., Hu, J., & Wayne, S. J. (2014). Servant leadership: Antecedents, consequences, and contextual moderators. *Leadership Quarterly*, 25(2), 285-307.
- Lord, R. G., & Hall, R. J. (2005). Identity, deep structure, and the development of leadership skill. *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(4), 591-615.
- Sendjaya, S., Sarros, J. C., & Santora, J. C. (2008). Defining and measuring servant leadership behaviour in organizations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 45(2), 402-424.
- Spears, L. C. (1995). *Reflections on leadership: How Robert K. Greenleaf's theory of servant-leadership influenced today's top management thinkers*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage.
- Su, C. (2025). The effect of servant leadership differentiation on team performance: Examining the mechanisms. *Modern Economic Management Forum*. Retrieved from <https://ojs.scineer-pub.com/index.php/MEMF/article/view/6093>
- Taylor, S (2013). *The development of a personal philosophy and practice of servant leadership: A grounded theory study*. Unpublished PHD. Rhodes University.
- Van Dierendonck, D. (2011). Servant leadership: A review and synthesis. *Journal of Management*, 37(4), 1228-1261.