

Developing Servant Leaders in Manufacturing: A Mixed-Methods Study of Leadership Growth and Follower Perceptions

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Abstract

This study explores the need for and development of servant leadership within a U.S.-based manufacturing context through a mixed-methods approach integrating follower-based assessment and qualitative inquiry. Grounded in servant leadership theory, particularly the centrality of listening as a defining leadership disposition (Greenleaf, 1977), the research investigates how leadership behaviors are practiced and experienced by those being led.

Participants were identified as emerging leaders by senior leadership and enrolled in a three-month leadership development program designed to cultivate relational and servant leadership competencies. Behaviors were measured using the Servant Leadership Questionnaire (Liden et al., 2008), completed by each leader's direct reports at two time points: prior to and following the training. This approach provided follower-based evaluations across key dimensions, including listening, empathy, and conceptualization. To deepen these findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of participants, focusing on their self-perceptions, leadership challenges, and developmental trajectories.

Findings indicate measurable growth in follower-perceived servant leadership behaviors, alongside a notable shift in leaders' self-awareness. Listening emerged as both a developmental gap and a critical area of improvement. Qualitative data suggest that structured reflection and one-on-one coaching conversations were instrumental in translating leadership concepts into consistent, observable practices.

This study contributes to leadership development research by demonstrating the effectiveness of integrating follower feedback and reflective dialogue, with implications for manufacturing and other industrial, operations-based organizations.

Keywords: Servant leadership; leadership development; manufacturing; follower perceptions; mixed-methods