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# International Leadership Journal

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## **From the Editor**

October 2016

Welcome to the 25<sup>th</sup> issue of the *International Leadership Journal*, an online, peer-reviewed journal. This issue contains five articles.

In the first article, Timiyo and Yeadon-Lee explore the underlying framework of the universality dimension of servant leadership and why viewing the construct as universal is necessary now and in the near future. Their thorough examination of the extant servant leadership reveals that there are still very many untapped possibilities for its theorization. They argue that theoretical exploration of the construct is a necessary condition for its advancement as a body of knowledge and possible sustainability, and declare a need for rigorous and systematic studies to establish it as a distinctive field of study.

Seto and Sarros developed a framework for examining trust in and quality relationships with leaders, specifically the dimensions of transforming influence and covenantal relationship. These dimensions were examined in relation to cognitive- and affect-based trust in leaders and quality relationships with leaders.

Thomas and Alluru address the critical leadership issues in the management of network alliances and define rules and practices necessary to ensure both efficiency and sustainability. They argue that network alliances must define their mission, select a champion to focus on that mission and generate trust within the alliance. They also find that leaders of network alliances need to set strategy-, learning-, and social-capital-oriented outcomes to be successful.

Scott and Halkias's study explored how consensus processes foster the development of relational trust among stakeholder leaders—central administrators, building administrators, and teachers—in a middle school environment. The interconnectedness of the participants' experiences revealed the central role of relational trust in developing collaborative working relationships among the three stakeholder groups.

Finally, in Shepherd's survey of graduate education students, he finds that the qualities and characteristics that the students most seem to prefer in their instructional leaders include interacting with them as individuals, remembering their individual needs, and acting consistently in a compassionate manner. Conversely, the qualities and characteristics that most damage a course leader's character in the eyes of his or her students include acting in a manner that communicates a lack of concern for individual needs; being disrespectful, rude, critical, uncaring, or harsh toward the class; presenting biased attitudes; and declining to help followers in obvious need.

Please let us know your thoughts and feel free to submit articles for review. Enjoy!

Joseph C. Santora, EdD  
Editor

## ARTICLES

### Universality of Servant Leadership\*

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Servant leadership is increasingly being tested and has been proven to be a viable tool for managing multicultural organizations. Existing empirical and conceptual studies on servant leadership suggest that this leadership construct is practicable. While many studies have investigated its effect on individual and organizational outcomes, none have studied the notion that servant leadership might have universal connotations. This conceptual article explores the underlying framework of the universality dimension of servant leadership and why viewing the construct as universal is necessary now and in the near future. By critically examining existing literature on servant leadership, this article offers robust and useful insights needed to stimulate the universality debate of servant leadership. The implications of the article for early career researchers are also discussed.

**Key words:** ethical leadership, servant leadership, spiritual leadership, transformational leadership, universality

In an attempt to advance research on servant leadership, the inaugural edition of the journal *Servant Leadership: Theory and Practice (SLTP)* was published in August 2014. While critics of the construct might not see the need for yet another journal on servant leadership, supporters might see this as a giant stride that is long overdue and capable of giving the construct profound recognition in academia. This giant stride suggests two things, particularly for early career researchers. First, servant leadership is arguably not just another management fad expected to fade away with time, nor is it an “epistemological fairytale” (Wacquant, 2002, 1481) as observed from the numerous research (Carroll & Patterson, 2014; de Waal & Sivro, 2012; Peterson, Galvin, & Lange, 2012) that has explored this leadership construct. These studies have established the significance of servant leadership in terms of fostering positive work-related behavioral outcomes both at the individual (Searle & Barbuto, 2011; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), and organizational levels (Hale & Fields, 2007; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Searle & Barbuto, 2011). Second,

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based on its relative significance in both academia and in practice, servant leadership has become a way of life (Ferch, 2005; Wallace, 2007, 2011). The construct is not only practiced in the workplace, but it is manifested in individuals' everyday life activities.

Servant leadership describes a situation in which leaders' ultimate priority lies in their ability to serve others (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009; Wheeler, 2012). It strongly advocates enhancement of employees' commitment, trust, and confidence as a key toward achieving organizational goals (Joseph & Winston, 2005; Miao, Newman, Schwarz, & Xu, 2014; Mittal & Dorfman, 2012; Patterson, 2003; Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008) while seeking a balance between serving the interests of organizations' internal and external customers. According to Greenleaf (1970), the goal of servant leaders goes beyond merely serving the needs of followers to ensuring that followers themselves are well developed to the extent of wanting to become servant leaders themselves. Building upon these definitions, *servant leadership* is defined here as an all-inclusive, dynamic, and ongoing leadership construct in which a leader's inclination to lead is born out of his or her desire to serve others. The construct is *all-inclusive* because it combines features of traditional leadership theories, often characterized by power and authority, with relational leadership theories. Servant leaders strive to meet the interests of their organization and its stakeholders, but everyone else in the organization is also expected to pursue others' interests before self-interests. Its *dynamism* is based on the understanding that servant leaders are expected to develop more servant leaders to succeed them in their organization. In doing so, the underlying assumptions of the construct are fully maintained and sustained. Servant leadership is also seen as a way of life, and an act of doing—an *ongoing* process!

The numerous conceptual and empirical studies that have determined the impact of servant leadership on individual and organizational performance have given scholars the impetus to comprehend this leadership construct. Insights from these studies indicate that the construct has universal connotations. Specifically, certain principles of servant leadership, such as vision, humility, and

service, were applicable in different organizations and societies (Hale & Fields, 2007). Viewing it from a universal dimension suggests that servant leadership is neither organization- nor country-specific. Following this line of argument, researchers have explored the construct across various subject areas and contexts, ranging from private and public (Chacksfield, 2014; Han, Kakabadse, & Kakabadse, 2010; Laub, 1999; Nazarpoori & Kalani, 2014; Walker & Nsiah, 2013; Wheeler, 2012) to profit and not-for-profit organizations (Sarros, Cooper, & Santora, 2011; Shirin, 2014).

Despite the plethora of research on servant leadership, the universality dimension of the construct has yet to gain significant recognition. There is a dearth of research exploring the construct from a universal point of view, which this conceptual article seeks to address. By critically examining servant leadership and comparing it to contemporary leadership theories, we identify key common principles of servant leadership across differing cultural and organizational settings. A systematic review of extant literature examines why servant leadership should be viewed as a universal leadership construct now and in the near future.

### **Servant Leadership: An Overview**

Similar to the situational leadership theory, servant leadership does not have one best way of leading. Instead, it is made up of varying numbers of interdependent principles or characteristics. Historically, this leadership construct uniquely combines the ideas of selflessness and quality service with people-centered leadership styles (Page & Wong, 2000). The uniqueness of the construct lies in its emphasis on viewing “service as a prerequisite to leading” (Wheeler, 2012, xv); leadership only emerges in the process of rendering service to others. Even though the servanthood idea existed long ago, particularly among clerics in religious and philosophical circles, it became formally recognized in academia from the works of Greenleaf in the early 1970s (Laub, 1999; Parris & Peachey, 2013; Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009).

Servant leadership can be traced back to how founders of major religions, human right activists, as well as great philosophers of old related to their followers. Jesus Christ and the Holy Prophet Mohammad, as well as most human rights activists, such as Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr., have adopted this philosophy at some point in time. The Bible describes an account of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, an attitude that reflected humility and service to his disciples and demonstrated that true and enduring greatness can only be attained by being humble and serving the needs of one's followers (John 3:13–17, New International Version). In other words, a master can still be great even if he or she performs the duties of a servant, which, in effect, defines the essence of servant leadership.

Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, also stated that life is meaningless unless its purpose is “to serve others and do good” (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009, 6). Simple acts of kindness express the guiding principles of servant leadership. Servant leadership therefore, is a leadership ideology that encourages leaders to serve the needs of subordinates and ensure that this attitude guides every decision they make in the organization (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Greenleaf wrote his first essay, “The Servant as Leader,” in an attempt to investigate the role of a servant. This was where he outlined key principles of servant leadership, which include listening, empathy, foresight, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, and emotional healing and described how to become a servant leader (Greenleaf, 1970). He argued that a true servant leader is one who is able to adopt one or more of these principles. Over the years, the numbers of these principles have varied among researchers. However, they generally include empowerment, authenticity, humility, accountability, courage, stewardship, encouraging subordinates' decision-making, and empathy (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

### **Servant Leadership and Related Leadership Theories**

Greenleaf (1970) emphasized that service to people ought to be the driving force of true and dedicated leadership, which is where servant leadership draws similarity with relational leadership theories like transformational leadership,

ethical leadership, and spiritual leadership. Research (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009) has traced the notion of universality to each of these theories, as they all advocate for the empowerment and improvement of subordinates and societal welfare.

*Transformational leadership* focuses on enhancing subordinates' trust and commitment towards realizing organizations' goals (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Stone et al., 2004). Supporters (Bass, 1997; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Bass & Riggio, 2014; Mannheim & Halamish, 2008) of transformational leadership believe that leaders can improve organizational performance by enabling subordinates to optimize their skills and competencies. Transformational leadership is similar to servant leadership in that they both advocate for the growth and development of subordinates, but they differ in their point of emphasis. Transformational leadership relies more on leaders to achieve organizational outcomes than the subordinates. Its undue emphasis on leaders is seen as a major drawback of transformational leadership theory. Servant leaders pay greater attention to serving subordinates' interests than their own interests in order to pursue desired outcomes in the organization (Humphreys, 2005).

*Ethical leadership* is defined as the "demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown et al., 2005, 120). Supporters (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1993) of the ethical leadership theory believe that every leadership situation has some form of ethical connotation. Like ethical leadership, servant leadership also has ethical connotations, which allows it to function effectively in different societies (Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges, Dastmalchian, & House, 2012; Mittal & Dorfman, 2012). Both ethical and servant leadership theories were found effective when applied in different organizational settings (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012). The overarching philosophy of the two theories rests in the leaders' inclination to serve others, rather than wanting to be served. They



suggest that the leader-follower dyad is mediated much more by social factors than by economic factors (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Harrison, 2013).

However, while ethical leadership focuses on improving organizational outcomes, servant leadership focuses on subordinates' welfare (Stone et al., 2004). Servant leaders believe that organizational performance can be improved by empowering subordinates to perform at optimal levels (Spears, 1996). This is one major distinguishing factor between servant leadership and other contemporary/service-oriented leadership theories. Ironically, unlike other leadership theories, the main emphasis of servant leadership is not on the acquisition of power, but on using power to serve other peoples' interests (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009).

Leading ethically describes the ability of leaders to rely on morality (right and wrong conducts of practice) to inspire and promote positive work-related behavior among subordinates (Brown & Treviño, 2006). However, issues of morality and fairness are understood and interpreted differently by people from different backgrounds and societies and are subject to leaders' and followers' ethical orientations. Ethical and servant leadership are both premised on the timeless philosophy of doing unto others what you want others to do unto you.

Similar to ethical and transformational leadership theories, proponents of *spiritual leadership* (Fry, 2003, 2009; Fry, Hannah, Noel, & Walumbwa, 2011; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013) believe in the divine connection between work and spirituality. These researchers are of the opinion that people needs to care for their inner beings as much as their physical beings, as both help maximize their potential. Research (Fry et al., 2011) has shown that spiritual leadership affects organizational outcomes and that, like servant leadership, spiritual leadership is also service-driven and service-oriented. While all the four leadership theories suggest a relational and moral approach toward addressing subordinates' needs, each adopts a different approach to leadership.

Interestingly, both transformational and ethical leadership have universal implications even though codes of conduct sometimes differ from society to society (Bass, 1997; Brown & Treviño, 2006). Unlike servant leadership, ethical

leadership seems to place more emphasis on organizational outcomes than on employees' growth and development. Servant leaders, on the other hand, view such outcomes as byproducts of subordinates' commitments, trust, and dedication (Graham, 1991; Humphreys, 2005; Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009; Liden et al., 2008).

### **Servant Leadership and Organizational Performance**

Many studies (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011) have investigated the impact of servant leadership on organizational performance. These studies have established that a positive relationship exists between servant leadership and organizational performance. For example, Reinke (2004) surveyed 651 employees in the state of Georgia to determine the relationship between servant leadership and trust between supervisors and subordinates. The preliminary results revealed that stewardship, a key characteristic of servant leadership, stimulated trust between employees and their supervisors. However, while servant leadership was not directly linked to organizational performance, Reinke argues that since the overall organizational performance is an aggregate of all employees' performance, whatever enhances individual employee performance will eventually be reflected in the overall organizational performance.

Hale and Fields (2007), on the other hand, explored the link between servant leadership and organizational performance using the dimensions of culture from the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) project. They conducted a cross-cultural study in Ghana and the United States to determine how three key servant leadership characteristics—humility, vision and service—enhance leadership effectiveness in different organizational settings. The sample consisted of 157 followers working in different types of organizations, 60 from Ghana and 97 from the United States. Results from the study revealed that while humility and service were unconnected to leadership effectiveness in the two countries, vision had a strong effect on leadership effectiveness, predominantly in Ghana. The reason for this difference was that power distance among leaders in Ghana was far greater than for leaders in the United States.

Likewise, Liden et al. (2008) sampled 182 students and employees in an organization to verify the effect of servant leadership on organizational performance, with a view of developing a multidimensional instrument with which servant leadership characteristics could be evaluated and measured. Data were collected from students, supervisors, and subordinates, and the two-phased study revealed that servant leadership improves employee commitment to an organization. Specifically, three characteristics of servant leadership—employee commitment to the organization, between-role performances, and organizational citizenship behavior—were found to have improved organizational performance via the employees.

In a similar study, Trompenaars and Voerman (2009) developed a straight-line Likert scale with which two opposing characteristics of servant leadership—serving and leading—were measured. Although the scale was unable to capture interconnected and conflicting values of leaders concurrently, it did offer a platform for identifying servant leadership characteristics in some organizations. Another multidimensional measuring scale, designed by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), examined servant leadership characteristics among leaders through a cross-cultural survey of 1,571 participants in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Eight servant leadership characteristics were found to have positive impact on employee performance: authenticity, courage, accountability, standing back, forgiveness, stewardship, empowerment, and humility. Of these, accountability, humility, and empowerment, had the greatest impact on employee job performance.

Peterson et al. (2012) sampled 126 chief executive officers (CEOs) in the United States to determine the effect of three characteristics—organizational identification, narcissism, and founder status—on organizational performance. While controlling for transformational leadership, the study showed that servant leadership has a positive association with organizational performance, measured in terms of returns on assets. However, the researchers noted that this positive relationship could have been triggered by the organization's engagement in certain corporate social responsibility activities. Again, the study revealed that

*narcissism*, the tendency to exhibit excessive love for control and power, was highly unconnected with the tenets of servant leadership.

De Waal and Sivro (2012) empirically tested the existing interrelationships among three key variables: servant leadership, organizational performance, and high-performance organizations. Based on a study of 1,200 employees in a university hospital in Amsterdam, the researchers determined the influential role servant leadership characteristics play on three performance indicators: annual financial statements, patient satisfaction, and employee loyalty. Although the findings suggested that patient satisfaction and financial statements were not directly connected to the three characteristics, employee loyalty was greatly improved by servant leadership behavioral patterns. The positive connection between servant leadership and employee loyalty was attributed to servant leadership characteristics, which were targeted at developing employee welfare.

Mittal and Dorfman (2012), on the other hand, conducted the first empirical study on servant leadership and national culture in 62 different countries. The authors intended to identify leadership behavioral patterns that lead to organizational effectiveness in different cultural settings. They also wanted to know whether company executives often lead in accordance to the cultural demands of a society or not and the implications of such actions. Data collected from 1,060 organizations revealed that leadership behavior was defined by the cultural demands of a given society. The study also showed that effective leaders were those who were able to maintain this standard, while those who could not were seen as ineffective leaders. The authors also found key leadership skills across the different countries. For example, the study identified vision, which is also one of the principles of servant leadership, to be a universally practiced leadership characteristic.

A similar study by Hunter et al. (2013) critically examined the association between three key variables: servant leadership, critical outcomes, and personality traits. The study of 224 stores, 425 subordinates, 110 in-store managers, and 40 district managers aimed to determine the effect of servant leadership on various outcomes and levels within and outside the organizations.

Extraversion and leader agreeableness (tendency to agree) were the two personality traits used in the study. Servant leadership characteristics were also analyzed from the point of view of both followers and leaders. Results from the study showed that leaders' extraversion had a negative association with servant leadership, while leaders' agreeableness was positively linked to the adoption of servant leadership principles.

The above reviewed literature reveals that servant leadership affects employee performance, which indirectly reflects on organizational performance. The next section deals with the universality debate of the concept of leadership and of servant leadership.

### **Universality of Leadership Theories**

*Universality* is described as the ability to effectively apply principles of servant leadership in different cultural and organizational settings. As a universal principle of management, leadership is as old as the story of creation and remains one of the most practiced managerial principles (Murdock, 1967, as cited in Bass, 1997). The universality aspect of leadership and, of course, servant leadership, seems to have taken its root from the universality of the principles of management. Certain managerial principles, such as direction, coordination, control, and staffing, were known to have universal applications as proposed by Koontz (1969). Based on this proposition and similar research, the pathway for the universality of servant leadership was created; however, the universality aspect of leadership is not a recent development.

Over the years, many authors (Bass & Stogdill, 1990; Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman, 1999; Dorfman, 1996) have, either equivocally or unequivocally, taken a universal stance to address the concept of leadership in different organizational and societal settings. Similar to the principles of management, their writings reflect the universality tendency of certain leadership skills, such as transformational skills, visionary skills, and charismatic skills, in terms of their broad application across different societies. Just as some aspects of leader behavior are considered productive because of

the positive influence it has on subordinates, there are also negative behavioral patterns whose practices are condemned in almost every society. Examples of such behaviors are dictatorship, unrepentant attitude, laziness, and dishonesty (Den Hartog et al., 1999).

Likewise, there is a parallel line of argument of this universality stance with respect to servant leadership behavioral pattern. It can be argued that the strength of servant leadership lies in its easy adoption in different societies regardless of their cultural orientations. Spears (1996) portrays servant leadership as a universal leadership approach, whereby both leaders and individuals are expected to carry out leadership duties in the process of serving others. Smith, Montagno, and Kuzmenko (2004), who drew similarities between transformational and servant leadership theories, agree with Spears and Lawrence (2002) that servant leadership has universal characteristics. Smith et al. strongly claim that servant leadership is applicable in virtually all types of cultures, regardless of cultural differences. In support of this claim, Dalati's (2014) research exploring the behavior of leaders in different cultural settings revealed that despite differences among leadership theories, they all "transcend national borders and are endorsed across cultures" (Dalati, 2014, 59). By developing a universal leadership model, this research sought to foster a sense of balance between self-development and improvement of individual leader behavior. In view of this, leadership theories such as servant leadership, charismatic leadership, transformational leadership, team-oriented leadership, visionary leadership, and authentic leadership are regarded as universal leadership theories because their principles have been found practicable across different cultures.

### **Universal Principles of Servant Leadership**

Due to its relative significance to individuals and organizations, servant leadership is currently being explored extensively from various angles. Early researchers (Ramsey, 2003; Spears, 1996, 2004) were more concerned about conceptualizing the construct with regard to how it differs from other leadership

theories than on how it leads to organizational outcomes. The emphasis has since shifted as researchers (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden et al., 2015; Liden et al., 2008; Nazarpouri & Kalani, 2014; Panaccio, Henderson, Liden, Wayne, & Cao, 2015; Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; Verdorfer & Peus, 2014) are now concerned about the development of appropriate instruments with which the characteristics of servant leadership can be evaluated based on empirical evidence.

In the last decade, the literature on servant leadership has been dominated by studies exploring the effectiveness of the construct in different cultural settings. For example, the cross-cultural study previously discussed by Hale and Fields (2007) empirically examined the effect of the servant leadership characteristics of humility, vision, and service on leadership effectiveness on 157 followers from Ghana and the United States. The findings revealed that vision was commonly found among these organizations, suggesting that servant leadership is neither contextually bound to any specific type of organization nor is it restricted geographically to a particular country/society.

Similarly, van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) empirical study to measure the dimension of servant leadership characteristics among leaders in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands revealed that eight characteristics of servant leadership: standing back, courage, forgiveness, humility, stewardship, authenticity, empowerment, and accountability, had a positive impact on subordinates' performance. Consistent with Hale and Fields' (2007) findings, some of these characteristics had universal implications. Specifically, humility was found present among the population of the study in both countries. The findings from Mittal and Dorfman's (2012) study also revealed aspects of servant leadership principles with universal orientations. Their study revealed that vision, a principle of servant leadership, was visibly present in the cultures of the different countries that were studied.

Finally, a similar study conducted by Dorfman et al. (2012) of the GLOBE project offers some significant insights to the culture–leadership dyad and the universality debate. The study showed that certain value-oriented behavioral

patterns of leaders, such as vision and integrity, led to leadership effectiveness in organizations regardless of the culture of the organization. While the findings from the GLOBE project reveal that value plays a key role in defining leader behavior, the implication is that some aspects of a leader's value system are universally accessible. Therefore, the above identified principles of servant leadership, such as humility (van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011), vision (Dorfman et al., 2012; Hale & Fields, 2007; Mittal & Dorfman, 2012), and integrity (Dorfman et al., 2012) suggest that servant leadership is a universal leadership construct.

## **Conclusion**

From the above discussion, it can be argued that, as far as the theorization of servant leadership is concerned, there are still very many untapped possibilities. The theoretical exploration of the construct is a necessary condition for its advancement as a body of knowledge and possible sustainability. Consequently, there is need to constantly conduct rigorous and systematic studies (Laub, 1999; Parris & Peachey, 2013) to make useful contributions to the existing knowledge on servant leadership and establish it as a distinctive field of study (Bryant & Brown, 2014). These options might not be mutually exclusive, but they serve as avenues through which the debate on servant leadership can be sustained, particularly through the aspect of its universalism.

In view of the prevailing global leadership challenges, it is arguably necessary to recognize servant leadership as a universal leadership construct in order to critically assess the diversity of individuals, organizations, and national cultures, as well as their impact on leadership research in line with some global standards. This is because leadership effectiveness is determined by how well leaders address the cultural expectations of subordinates vis-à-vis organizational outcomes. The universality dimension of servant leadership does not completely ignore, neither does it fail to appreciate, the individualism of leaders—differences and/or uniqueness of individual leaders within the leadership equation (Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009). Until these differences are recognized and critically



examined, the leadership challenge may continue to haunt both academics and practitioners.

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## **Servant Leadership Influence on Trust and Quality Relationship in Organizational Settings\***

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In the current economic climate, the integrity of key political and business figures and their investments is being questioned (e.g., the Panama Papers and the demise of Bear Stearns). This makes it abundantly clear that it is important for business leaders to set a moral high ground that motivates their employees to aspire to a greater performance for the benefit of their shareholders. Furthermore, organizations invest a significant amount of money in different modes of compensation and other incentives to recruit and train employees each year. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to retain these employees. This article discusses the relationships between servant leadership, trust in leaders, and quality relationships with leaders in organizational settings. Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora's (2008) servant leadership construct was used to develop a framework for examining trust in and quality relationships with leaders, specifically the dimensions of transforming influence and covenantal relationship. These dimensions were examined in relation to cognitive- and affect-based trust in leaders and quality relationships with leaders.

**Key words:** quality relationship with leader, servant leadership, trust in leader

Organizations are facing multiple layers of changing political, economic, social, and technological forces, which influence the way business is conducted. These important forces, which interact to continually redraw the competitive landscape, require organizations to transform themselves to maintain their competitive advantage. Organizations invest a significant amount of time, money, and effort on retaining, developing, and nurturing employees' talent and potentials (Bassi & McMurrer, 2007) to achieve sustained growth and competitive advantage, and to open them to a global workforce. Given the current business environment, leadership—most notably, servant leadership—is of particular relevance as the interaction between leader and follower are key components in building trust and quality relationships. Therefore, there has been increasing interest in servant leadership and its influence on trust and quality relationships in the academic and

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business world. Accordingly, this article examines two dimensions of servant leadership that are of critical importance to the success of organizations operating in a fiercely competitive global landscape: transforming influence and covenantal relationship, as developed by Sendjaya et al. (2008). The results of the current and future research are important for promoting more rigorous leadership research and thereby enhancing leadership theory and practice, specifically best practices for promoting followers' trust and quality relationships through servant leadership.

### **Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership has been a subject of intense interest for more than three decades. A quality relationship between a leader and his or her followers, or employees, makes them feel positive about their organization and enhances their self-esteem. The characteristics of a servant leader are based on the desire to motivate, guide, offer hope, and provide a caring relationship through building quality relationships with their followers (Greenleaf, 2002). It could be argued that servant leadership inspires employees to put extra effort into and show greater concern for the organization, essential for organizational citizenship behavior (Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997). Confidence in business leadership has been diminishing, requiring the development of leaders who put their followers and organizations ahead of their own interests. Servant leaders create an atmosphere in which followers feel accepted, regardless of failures, thus facilitating followers' creativity and professional growth (van Dierendonck & Rook, 2010). Followers feel empowered to communicate freely, which reduces their perceptions of power and status to the extent that they feel like equal partners in the organization.

Sendjaya et al.'s (2008) Servant Leadership Scale identifies six core dimensions: voluntary subordination, authentic self, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, transcendental spirituality, and transforming influence. The focus of this study is the dimensions of transforming influence and covenantal relationship, both of which positively influence organizational performance.

Table 1 lists the constituent elements of each of these dimensions.

**Table 1: Dimensions of Servant Leadership**

Transforming Influence	Covenantal Relationship
Vision Modeling Mentoring Trust Empowerment	Acceptance Availability Equality Collaboration

Adapted from "Defining and Measuring Servant Leadership Behaviour in Organizations," by S. Sendjaya, J. Sarros, & J. C. Santora, 2008, *Journal of Management Studies*, 45(2), p. 409.

### Transforming Influence

*Transforming influence* occurs when "those who are served by servant leaders are positively transformed in multiple dimensions (e.g., emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually) into servant leaders themselves" (Sendjaya et al., 2008, 408). Leaders who act as role models for subordinates by serving and forming quality relationships with them and helping them grow and develop facilitate organizational citizenship behavior among workers. The success of the organization is affected by the way the leader crafts and communicates the vision. The transforming influence creates a working environment characterized by cooperation in which followers are motivated to give back to the leader and the organization by engaging in roles outside their formal employment contract. Transformational influence is achieved through selflessness, shared leadership, and participative decision making when followers share the leader's vision. It is like a chain reaction that becomes contagious throughout the organization.

The role of the transforming servant leader is to envision, promote, embrace, and display these behaviors that are positively related to developing a quality relationship with followers while improving the organization's well-being. The quality of the relationship between the leader and his or her followers is positively related to follower behavior.

### Covenantal Relationship

A *covenantal relationship* is defined by Sendjaya et al. (2008) as "an intensely personal bond marked by shared values, open-ended commitment, mutual trust,

and concern for the welfare of the other party” (407). The elements of trust and authenticity comprise the construct of covenantal relationship. In order to be an authentic leader, you must first be an authentic person. According to Sendjaya et al. (2008), “the authenticity of servant leaders significantly shapes and affects their relationships to others” (407) Authenticity involves more than just feelings—it is deeper. It is being true to oneself and not being influenced by one’s situation.

In essence, a covenantal relationship encourages collaboration, social interaction, and positive self-esteem in followers. Servant leaders share leadership with followers, which will generate even greater empowerment and reciprocal interactions between servant leaders and followers and within followers themselves, leading to the development of a shared vision.

### **Servant Leadership and Trust**

Implicit in the concept of trust is acknowledging vulnerability, starting with the leader. If the leader is not willing to be open and admit his or her mistakes or ask for assistance, then employees will not be comfortable with being vulnerable. Trust grows in an environment where there is a willingness to make oneself vulnerable to others without ulterior motives. If leaders are genuinely interested in their followers’ needs and well-being, followers are more likely to trust them and perceive fair treatment. Organizational citizenship behaviors and job satisfaction are natural results of such trust. A leader’s influence on employees is accomplished through trust, admiration, loyalty and respect, which encourage employees to work harder to achieve objectives (Geib & Swenson, 2013).

### **Types of Trust**

This study investigates the relationship between the types of trust leaders place in their employees, particularly the extent to which cognition-based and affect-based trust are positively related to servant leadership. *Cognition-based trust* involves logic, which is based on evidence supporting the other person’s reliability and competence under specific circumstances. In contrast, *affect-based trust* involves the person’s own emotions toward the other person’s feelings and motives. Affect-based trust is especially important as employees make personal

investments in building trusting relationships, expressing concern, and caring for the well-being of others, which in turn are reciprocated (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). A servant leader's altruism (serving the interests of their followers first before his or her own interests) has a positive impact on employee motivation and performance and may provide an attribution basis for affect-based trust.

## **Servant Leadership and Quality Relationship**

The positive influence of leaders on their followers can help shift employee self-focus to a collective focus. The cornerstone of employee growth and development is focusing on their needs and formulating a plan to meet them. With exhibition of such interest from the leader, employees are likely to experience a sense of empowerment and see work as more stimulating, challenging, and involving, and thereby engage in organizational citizenship behavior. Nurturing support offered by servant leaders can help employees reach their full potential and foster an organizational culture that is conducive to growth and service. Furthermore, if employees perceive receptive, nonjudgmental listening by their leader, their confidence in exploring new initiatives will grow, as they believe their leadership respects their ideas.

Care and support by servant leaders fosters cooperative working relationships and team effectiveness. According to Shaver and Mikulincer (2008), a leader's lack of support and concern creates counterproductive work behaviors and negative relational ties in the organization. Servant leaders who build quality relationships and provide regular feedback motivate employees intrinsically. In addition, task autonomy for employees fosters their sense of value to the team and belongingness to the organization.

## **Method and Results**

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among servant leadership, trust in leader, and quality relationship with leader among 328 employees in the automotive industry in Canada, who completed an online survey questionnaire from their human resources department. In order to study

these effects, we also performed an extensive literature review focused on the transforming influence and covenantal relationship dimensions of servant leadership and their relationship to cognitive- and affect-based trust and quality relationships with leader. According to the results of this research study, the transforming influence and covenantal relationship dimensions of servant leadership are positively and statistically significantly related to affect-based trust in a leader and quality relationship with leader. Table 2 shows the correlations of servant leadership, trust, and quality relationship with leader. As shown in Table 2, the strongest correlation is between servant leadership and trust ( $r = .89$ ).

**Table 2: Correlation Between Servant Leadership, Trust in Leader, and Quality Relationship with Leader**

	Servant Leadership	Trust in Leader
Servant Leadership	—	
Trust in Leader	.89*	—
Quality Relationship with Leader	.64*	.61*

Note. \*  $p \leq .017$ .

The findings of this study make a number of important contributions to the literature. First, the results of this study add a new construct to the servant leadership framework that has been linked to transformational leadership in previous research. Second, this study used validated measurement scales, strengthening the reliability of the results. Third, this study used confirmatory factor analysis to verify the constructs of the validated instruments. Research has linked servant leadership to transformational leadership, which encourages organizational citizenship behavior and trust in leader. Significant to these findings is that the leader-employee relationship should be based on trust and mutual respect. Servant leadership and cognitive- and affect-based trust have a statistically significant positive relationship. This study provided the required differentiation between the two types of trust—cognitive- and affect-based—that had not been addressed by previous studies (Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010).

The results of this study have uncovered the previously unexamined relationship and effect of servant leadership on quality relationships with leaders. Additionally, this study examined the relationship between servant leadership and quality relationships with leaders in organizational settings, which was a significant gap in the servant leadership literature (Parris & Peachey, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Although there have been many empirical studies on organizational citizenship behavior in relation to servant leadership, further examination of the theories, models, and distinctions between servant leadership and organizational citizenship behavior is warranted. The findings of this study demonstrate significant positive relationships between organizational citizenship behavior, servant leadership, trust in leader, and quality relationships with the leader. The results of this and future research would be vital for promoting more rigorous leadership research, thereby enhancing leadership theory and practice, specifically best practices for promoting organizational citizenship behavior through servant leadership and employee trust. This study brought additional clarity to servant leadership by linking trust-building behaviors and quality relationships with servant leaders.

There are several additional intriguing theoretical contributions of this study for future research. First, researchers have not previously tested the introduction of cognitive- and affect-based trust in servant leadership. Although researchers have examined the role of trust in leaders and organizations in explaining the relationship of servant leadership with work-related outcomes (van Dierendonck, 2011), this is the first study that examined servant leadership and cognitive- and affect-based trust in leader, as well as individualized consideration and support or quality relationships with leader. The introduction of the cognitive- and affect-based trust constructs will provide researchers further assistance in explaining the mechanisms through which leadership behavior relates to and influences organizational citizenship behavior. Trust encompasses followers' perceptions regarding their workplaces and can potentially demonstrate a significant

difference for organizational outcomes (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014).

Since the development of servant leadership theory and its measurement scales, much of the research effort has focused on the behavioral aspects in which servant leadership is more or less likely to emerge. Based on the findings of this study, we are better able to understand how servant leadership influences employees' behavioral outcomes by focusing on the constructs of trust and quality relationships. Previous studies have suggested that the quality of the leader and follower relationship is strongly influenced by trust. Further, studies suggest that when employees have high-quality relationships with the leader, they feel obligated to reciprocate a benefit (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and are likely to seek ways to engage in extra role behaviors towards the leader and organization. Thus, if the end goal of an organization is to foster more extra-role behaviors, organizations should consider adopting servant leadership behaviors, as well as trust and quality relationships between leaders and followers (Jaramillo, Bande, & Varela, 2015; Rai & Prakash, 2012; Whisnant & Khasawneh, 2014).

Moreover, the servant leadership model suggests the importance of individualized considerate relationships between servant leaders and employees, particularly cultivating trusting and quality relationships as a mechanism for influencing positive organizational outcomes. The transforming influence and covenantal relationship characteristics of servant leaders related positively to employees exhibiting citizenship behaviors. Focusing on employees' well-being engenders trust among employees toward the leader and the organization. The organization's leadership practices determine the success under which employees can become servant leaders themselves. In order for employees to flourish, they need opportunities and incentives to reach above and beyond their formal jobs.

Given the increasing complexity of and competition in the business environment, companies are under enormous pressure to enhance employee productivity and financial results (Sarros, Cooper, & Santora, 2008). Companies with goals to become an employer of choice in their industries need to employ

and continuously develop high-potential people by adopting strategies that build, inspire, and nourish trust and sustainable relationships. This study demonstrated that these traits are associated with servant leaders. More importantly, focusing on followers' well-being, as consistent with servant leaders, engenders trust, positive relationships/teamwork among employees, and active engagement in the organization. Cultivating an atmosphere of job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior enhances employee performance. Thus, encouraging servant leadership and recruiting servant leaders have a high potential to encourage team and organizational performance.

Employers want their employees to face their workday with a feeling of importance and value to the organization. The servant leadership system of reciprocal direction motivates followers to cooperate as they experience a feeling of being appreciated. When servant leaders facilitate participation and lead by example, followers feel empowered and are more productive and feel satisfied, resulting in significant benefits to the organization.

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## Leadership Practices and Performance Within Network Alliances: Framing Sustainable Organizational Guidelines \*

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Over the past decade, more than 42,000 interfirm alliances have been created (Greve, Rowley, & Shipilov, 2013). However, almost 60% of them did not meet their goals (Whitler, 2014). Failure was generally attributed to a lack of clear strategy and poor leadership. This article addresses the critical leadership issues in the management of network alliances and defines rules and practices necessary to ensure both efficiency and sustainability. Network alliances must define their mission, select a champion to focus on that mission and generate trust within the alliance. Leaders of network alliances also need to set strategy-, learning-, and social-capital-oriented outcomes to be successful. Staff must also be trained to lead successful alliances.

**Key words:** leadership, network alliance, organizational culture, performance, trust

*Network alliances* are defined as any voluntary and enduring arrangements between three or more firms involving the exchange, sharing, or co-development of products, technologies, or services (Gulati, 2007). Over the past decade, more than 42,000 interfirm alliances have been created (Greve et al., 2013). However, almost 60% of them did not meet their goals (Whitler, 2014). Failure was generally attributed to a lack of clear strategy and poor leadership. Clearly, a better understanding of the challenges of managing and leading network alliances is required.

Companies use network alliances in order to compete more successfully (Holtbrügge, Wilson, & Berg, 2006). Day (1995) notes that organizations with strong alliance skills “have a deep base of experience that is woven into a core competency that enables them to outperform rivals in many aspects of alliance management” (299). Indeed, given the rapid proliferation of alliances and other forms of interfirm relationships in recent years, neglecting the strategic networks

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in which firms are embedded can lead to an incomplete understanding of firm behavior and performance. The example of one industry, the U.S. automobile industry, suggests how industries can no longer be meaningfully analyzed without considering the strategic networks that bind firms within them (Gulati, Nohria, & Zaheer, 2000). Changes in this industry include fewer suppliers, longer-term relationships, and greater supplier involvement in the design process, all of which have significantly improved the competitiveness of U.S. automakers (Dyer, 1996; Gulati & Lawrence, 1999). Examples abound of other forms of interfirm collaboration and of their strategic importance for firms within this industry (Womack, Jones, & Roos, 1990). In the current business context, therefore, a heightened awareness of the strategic networks in which firms are situated becomes a central, rather than a peripheral, focus for understanding firm strategy and performance.

Gomes-Casseres (1994) points out that alliance group formation has been favored in recent years by the increasing sophistication of products and services at the design, production, and delivery level. Most products today contain components incorporating wholly distinct and specialized technologies involving a multitude of skills in production. Since no one organization has the capacity to develop such proficiencies, a natural alternative is through the use of alliances. Alliance networks can help member companies promote their technologies and gain the critical mass required to persuade more businesses to use their designs (Gomes-Casseres, 1994). Following the logic of resource dependence theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), strategic alliances can be particularly useful for organizations because they help manage costs (Elmuti, Abou-Zaid, & Jia, 2012) and reduce risks (Hitt, Dacin, Levitas, Arregle, & Borza, 2000) through the use of shared resources. Alliances may also be used to avoid significant financial commitment in new ventures.

However, this does not mean there is no cost both in terms of resources dedicated to the project, the reputation of the company, the personnel involved, and future options taken by the company. This article addresses the critical leadership issues necessary for the management of network alliances and

defines rules and practices necessary to ensure both efficiency and sustainability. The challenges of network alliance leadership are outlined, and insights into how these can be overcome are also given.

### **Leadership in Network Alliances vs. Individual Organizations**

There are fundamental differences in approaches to leadership within a classic organization and within a network alliance. Agranoff (2007) points out that leadership is different in multi-actor settings such as networks. The organizational actors and structure of operations are distinctive and the problems faced in such settings are different (O'Toole, 1997). In fact, personal motivation aside, the principle aim of employees is generally the well-being of their organization because their own futures are intrinsically linked to its success. However, within a network alliance, employees have to consider the simultaneous well-being of both their own companies and the alliance. They will also be constantly measuring the benefits of remaining within the alliance, thus generating an inherent tension.

Judge and Ryman (2001) stress that successful strategic alliances have leaders with relatively extensive power and authority over their own organizations, but relatively constrained power and authority over the alliance. Unlike leadership within an organization, which may often be quite hierarchical and adheres to clear and transparent rules, leadership within an alliance should focus on sustaining the alliance. Alliances are generally complicated to manage and frequently subject to instability. Porter (1990) suggests that "alliances are frequently transitional devices" that "proliferate in industries undergoing structural change or escalating competition" (66–67). Partners therefore need "a sense of equitable participation and involvement" (Reid, Smith, & McCloskey, 2008, 591) to continue their support. Such benefits may differ according to each individual member, and leaders need to adapt to this. It is thus vital for a network alliance to have an efficient management and leadership structure (Reid et al., 2008).

Alliance leadership has to handle complex interaction settings and work with the different strategies of the various actors involved (Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan,

1997). This implies that leadership in such alliances necessitates the orientation and guidance of the activities of independent, powerful organizations (Beyer & Browning, 1999). The network alliance of Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Disney is a good example. Coca-Cola is the exclusive supplier to McDonald's and Disney Parks and assists those partners in setting up new operations all over the world. McDonald's and Coca-Cola use the Disney cartoon characters in their marketing and advertising efforts. McDonald's, in turn, is a marketing and sales channel for Coca-Cola and Disney (Duysters, De Man, & Wildeman, 1999). If Disney wants to partner with Pepsi, it would experience pressure from McDonald's as well. Therefore, the alliance's interest becomes a priority for Disney.

The key elements to efficient leadership in network alliances include:

- defining a clear but flexible mission for the network alliance,
- ensuring that one person or small group champion that mission and provide momentum,
- generating trust within the network alliance,
- establishing criteria that accurately calculate the success of the alliance, and
- training staff within the organization to ensure the sustainability of the network alliance.

### **Defining the Mission of the Network Alliance**

Defining the underlying reasons for creating a network alliance and then setting a clear mission are crucial for future success. Based on their research in global alliances in the tourism industry, Crofts, Buhalis, and March (2000) advise organizations to undertake a systematic analysis for their need to participate in an alliance based on the following five questions:

- Do we want to partner?
- Do we have the ability to partner?
- With whom do we partner?
- How do we partner?
- How do we sustain and renew a relationship over time?

They suggest that potential partners should be judged on their reputation, performance, capabilities, goal compatibility, and trustworthiness (Crotts et al., 2000). Organizations that systematically follow such strategic analysis and undertake due diligence would generally assume that defining the mission might be relatively simple. However, “finding a mission and a strategy that works for all the participants can be a real challenge” (Thomas, 2014, 57). Most alliances do not spring into life fully formed and are gradually built in a more ad hoc fashion. (Gomes-Casseres, 1994). In fact, the complexities of a network alliance may often be linked to the diverse opinions that exist concerning its fundamental purpose and aims (Thomas, 2016). The mission should thus be clearly defined from the outset. It should then be committed in writing and widely distributed within each company to ensure that it is clearly understood. The success of the alliance will then depend upon the protagonist, namely the alliance leadership, constantly reminding themselves of the basic principles that they have set themselves (Reid et al., 2008).

One good example is Boeing’s formation of a global collaborative network with more than 50 partners when it began the Dreamliner project in 2004. The purpose, which was clearly stated from the outset, was to control costs, reduce time to market, and access specialist expertise. Boeing gave its partners responsibility for the supply chain and required them to perform according to the agreed-upon standards embedded in the overall design engineering tolerances (Shuman & Twombly, 2010).

### **Championing a Successful Network Alliance**

In a traditional organization, the CEO will usually have a central role in ensuring that the mission is pursued. This is then generally disseminated down within the organization. However, this role is more complex within a network alliance since most of the network partners will believe that their organizations have almost equal voices. This may not actually be the case, but that belief will have an impact on how participants approach the alliance since natural authority and leadership is thus not a given. In such contexts, De Meyer, Harker, and Hawawini

(2004) point out that an alliance “champion” is required to launch and sustain a project (110). Such champions motivate members of the alliance, particularly when facing obstacles. If they work skillfully and with tact, they will also ensure that countercultures do not occur within the alliance that could be detrimental to its efficient workings.

In their study of collaborations between small and medium enterprises and universities, Buganza, Colombo, and Landoni (2014) suggest that alliance champions play a crucial role in maintaining a strong alliance. Champions promote new product ideas and create a link between people and organizations (Hauschildt, 1999). Thomas (2014) highlights this in his analysis of a marketing-based network alliance in higher education. He notes that one or two key people had been deemed by the alliance as vital to ensuring that the group remained a combined unit and that development momentum was maintained at all times.

Such was also the case with Carlo Gavazzi Space (CGS) and its network of alliances. Taking into account the constant need for the latest and most highly sophisticated technology and tools in satellite production, CGS acknowledged that it could only survive if their efforts were dedicated to specialized segments, which kept its production and overhead costs lower than its large competitors (Nosella & Petroni, 2007). CGS’s leadership encouraged the adaptation of a cooperative culture with key individuals given the role of pushing forward an ambitious agenda. This ensured that members stayed motivated and shared common goals, which was important for establishing the network’s legitimacy.

### **Generating Trust Within the Network Alliance**

Cooperation is expected to be more or less a rule in a network alliance (Håkansson & Sharma, 1996). Neale and Bazerman (1992) note that just as in personal relationships, partners in strategic alliances often feel vulnerable in the initial stages of the relationship. Firms often begin a relationship apprehensive of each other’s motives. This early vulnerability and suspicion makes partners tentative in their involvement in the relationship and reluctant to reveal true motives, business know-how, or technology (Cullen, Johnson, & Sakano, 2000).



Networks will work if the nodes in the network have credibility with each other, so attention should be given to activities that build credibility early on (Gatignon, Kimberly, & Gunther, 2004).

Baum, Calabrese, and Silverman (2000) explain that strategic alliances are inherently incomplete contracts in which the property rights associated with alliance output and profits may not be well defined. As a result, collaborators risk opportunistic exploitation by their partners, including leaking proprietary knowledge to partners or otherwise losing control of important assets. From a resource-based view (RBV) perspective, opportunistic behavior by an alliance participant seems designed to maximize the resources derived from an alliance, though it is not necessarily in the best interest of the alliance (Dickson, Weaver, & Hoy, 2006). Although appropriate use of the governance structures might improve these concerns, intra-alliance rivalry retains the potential to severely disrupt an alliance and to harm a participating firm (Baum et al., 2000). Indeed, the empirical findings of Van Gils and Zwart (2004) indicate that several entrepreneurs do not cooperate because they fear transferring their know-how and losing their competitive advantage.

Leaders of network alliances should therefore invest time and money in cultural training and communications. This is important because higher levels of mutual trust and commitment lead to better alliance performance (Cullen et al., 2000). A good collaboration thus recognizes the interdependent nature of the alliances. When top executives take a collaborative approach, they are often viewed as trustworthy over time (Judge & Ryman, 2001). Without trust and commitment, an alliance will fail entirely or, at the very least, fail to reach its strategic potential (Cullen et al., 2000). Lack of trust could have serious implications on a network alliance, such as partners holding back information or taking unfair advantage of each other if given the opportunity (Cullen et al., 2000).

Trust and commitment play a crucial role in bridging cultural differences and solving communication problems (Cullen et al., 2000). Toshiba, IBM, and Siemens AG united to form a joint R&D venture to produce a next generation of computer chips (Browning, 1994). Unfortunately, not all went smoothly. Initially,

the Japanese Toshiba employees found it difficult to work in small, isolated offices. The closed cubicles were completely different from their usual open office spaces. The German Siemens AG employees were horrified that the Japanese slept in meetings when a topic did not concern them. The American IBM employees complained that the Germans planned too much and slowed things down (Cullen et al., 2000). Difficulties in communication in English, lack of sufficient cross-cultural training, and differences in management styles also plagued the venture. The result was a lack of trust; a withdrawal of the Japanese, Germans, and Americans into their own teams; and perhaps more importantly, the belief that the other companies' scientists and engineers held back information and did not share ideas (Cullen et al., 2000).

Network alliances introduce partners to new potential future partners, along with their needs, capabilities, and alliance requirements, and thus reduce search costs. Without such trusted information, an alliance between two firms is less likely (Van de Ven, 1976). During his extensive fieldwork on alliances, one manager commented to Gulati (2007): "If one of our long-standing partners suggests one of their own partners as a good fit for our needs, we usually consider it very seriously" (11).

Even though networks transfer information, power, and cooperation, these advantages are not evenly distributed within the network. Some network players (individuals or firms) occupy better positions than others, which is why network advantages create competitive advantages. Some network positions are better than others (Greve et al., 2013). Of course, this leads to questions of how success can truly be measured for each member of the alliance.

### **Measuring the Success of a Network Alliance**

Measuring performance can be difficult in an alliance (Simonin, 1999). However, it is vital if organizations are to fully understand to what extent the network alliance has been beneficial and how best to manage future cooperation. Based on their case study research in Indiana, Wang and Fesenmaier (2007) define three broad outcomes from a strategic alliance:

- **Strategy-oriented outcomes.** These are achieved through sharing costs and having a greater reach with regard to products and services that may be offered.
- **Learning-oriented outcomes.** This learning comes from the interaction within the alliance that enables members to implement best practices into their organizations.
- **Social-capital-oriented outcomes.** These are the resources that become available through the increased personal and business connections in the day-to-day workings of the alliance. “These resources include information, ideas, leads, business opportunities, power and influence, emotional support, even goodwill, trust, and the spirit of cooperation” (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007, 872).

### **Strategy-Oriented Outcomes with a Network Alliance**

Wilson (2008) argues that “most network alliance formation is driven by strategic transformation-related goals such as innovation-based growth objectives” (5). The key element in proving the strategic validity of the network alliance is revenue generation. Well-organized networks will set some initial targets and measure their performance against them.

In their study of a network alliance designed to develop Canadian tourism, Reid et al. (2008) note that the alliance adopted a simple but effective financial measure to determine the success of their actions. The original Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) specified return on investment (ROI) targets of 10 to 1 for their marketing actions in the United States and 5 to 1 for marketing actions in other countries. Thus, for each dollar spent promoting the region of Canada, the alliance expected to recover \$10 in new revenue from American tourists. This target was clear, memorable, and simple to verify. In fact, in 2005, the alliance was able to measure estimate revenues of \$1,772,000 for an investment of \$146,000, for a ROI of 12.1 to 1. It would seem logical that leadership within any network alliance would focus on the desired financial returns as one of the key elements to determine from the very beginning of the alliance. However, setting a number and then benchmarking operations against it might not be as easy as it

sounds. Reid et al. (2008) admit that it was difficult at times to compare figures from one period to another.

Thomas (2014) describes a problem during the creation of a European higher education marketing consortium designed to recruit international students. He notes that each institution set an individual target that was shared with the group and collated for a target for the consortium. However, given that the institutions were entering new territory, few institutions had any real basis on which to fix their estimations. Thus, the targets were viewed as highly inaccurate and overly optimistic. Many of the institutions eventually met their targets, but with a delay of two or three years, and after the consortium had been considerably reorganized to include a full-time sales director. Given such experience, it is necessary to set targets, but also to ensure that they are flexible and can be understood within the context of a changing economic and business environment.

### **Learning-Oriented Outcomes with a Network Alliance**

There is no question that many firms enter alliances with learning objectives. In reality, however, learning through alliances is very difficult. Although alliances often create valuable learning opportunities, taking advantage of those opportunities is a difficult, frustrating, and often misunderstood process (Inkpen, 2005). To overcome this problem, feedback sessions should be the norm. However, these are often overlooked by companies and the learning generated through the alliance is lost.

One network that overcame this challenge is the Star Alliance, one of the world's largest global airline alliances, which was founded in 1997. Lazzarini (2007) reports that a full-time Alliance Management Team was created in 2000 with the goal of reporting back to each airline on the progress of the alliance and what had been learned during each period. Cooperation was multi-level, including the establishment of technical committees and coordination within the marketing operations and IT platforms. This constant feedback and analysis of what had been learned led to increasing trust with the alliance. That allowed more ambitious projects to be undertaken, such as the creation of StarNet, a sophisticated IT platform linking the computing systems of all member airlines.

The success of this has allowed the alliance to expand to 27 member airlines that cover 20,000 flights daily. Learning, feedback, and adaptation were seen to be crucial elements in the success of the alliance (Thomas, 2016).

Orchestrating is also an important capability. This entails the capacity to integrate the network resources of different partners with each other and with the organization's own internal resources, configuring or combining them to create synergies (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Toyota developed such a capability for sharing knowledge among partners in its supply network. This capability was built in conjunction with the supplier association, which has established a shared social community and norms for knowledge sharing among partnering suppliers and with Toyota. Furthermore, Toyota has also put in place cross-organizational learning teams and employee transfers across partners in the network as additional ways to ensure that network resources are distributed and shared (Dyer & Nobeoka, 2000). This capability complements the scanning they have to perform to look for new alliance partners. This takes the form of exploratory efforts to seek out prospective associates using industry scanning techniques. It continues with the channeling and integration of network resources, and ends with the effective exploitation of network resources by the organization. For these processes to create value, the partners must offer rich resources that are otherwise difficult to develop internally and that generate synergies when combined with internal resources and other network resources accessible by the organization (Lavie, 2006).

In their analysis of networks and managerial culture and practice, Chauvet, Chollet, Soda, and Huault (2011) advocate strongly for training programs aimed at improving network-building abilities for employees as well as designing criteria to help senior management recognize key individuals who are effective at networking. Based on their conceptual framework on the creation of strategic sales alliances, Jones, Chonko, and Roberts (2003) come to a similar conclusion. They encourage sales training that goes beyond the product or service and takes into account the needs of the alliance as a whole. This should be widespread within the company and go well beyond those employees who are

directly involved in the alliance. Jones et al. emphasize that “management’s role is to create a learning orientation within both companies and between both companies as partners. A key dimension of this learning orientation is energizing people to act as partners in their own development” (339).

One obstacle that must be overcome is opportunistic behavior—firms entering into an alliance with the explicit objective of winning “the learning race,” wherein “the use of resources is determined by the expected benefits related to the learning—an underlying tension is usually present across the network partnership.” (Wilson, 2008, 8). As Gulati et al. (2000a) note, knowledge and information may benefit only one partner. This approach leads to a “trying to learn, trying to protect” dilemma with alliance partners seeking to learn and appropriate as much knowledge as possible while trying to protect some of their own competencies. The ultimate objective is for a partner to learn as much as possible and to give as little as possible until they may safely withdraw from the alliance. To mitigate the threat of such opportunism, firms seeking alliance partners for technology development should ensure their strategic goals converge while their competitive goals differ. If partners are competitors in end-product markets, the threat of each firm attempting to internalize each other’s knowledge may lead to the alliance’s goals being compromised (Wilson, 2008).

### **Social-Capital-Oriented Outcomes with a Network Alliance**

Social capital allows a firm to gain access to information. Social-capital outcomes are perhaps the least tangible of those described and, as such, may be totally overlooked. Portes (1998) asserts that *social capital* is the “ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (6). However, consideration of these is still important in the final judgement of the overall success of an alliance. Such capital can be an important catalyst in an alliance’s development, offering new production opportunities (Gulati, 1998). Given that social networks are not “static structures” (Gulati, 1998, 306), but rather emergent constructions, there is a need for constant reflection in a systematic and structured fashion. Formal feedback sessions should thus become routine procedure within organizations. According to Lambe, Spekman,

and Hunt (2002), the development of such alliance competencies “should enhance the ability of firms to use alliances as a strategic option for pooling and deploying partner firms’ basic resources to compete in their marketplace” (143).

### **Training Staff to Lead Successful Network Alliances**

Shuman and Twombly (2010) point out that myths about collaboration often result in managers and executives failing to understand that the success or failure of many endeavors hinges on the ability of people to collaborate. People are often told to collaborate, but have little understanding of what that means or what they are supposed to do in a particular instance (Shuman & Twombly, 2010). Thomas (2016) concurs, noting that through coaching and encouraging internal communication on the mission and the need for the alliance, there is greater transparency within the members and the development of trust. The results of a study by Dyer, Kale, and Singh (2001) confirm the importance of having specific staff dedicated to managing inter-organizational relationships. They note that “firms with a dedicated function achieved a 25% higher long-term success rate with their alliances than those without such a function” (38).

Green and Keogh (2000) stress that employees used to working in conventional hierarchical relationships cannot suddenly be expected to work effectively within network alliances. Their extensive study of the oil and gas industry showed that one of the critical success factors was the training of employees to help them develop their cross organization management skills.

### **Conclusion**

Alliances are becoming increasingly important as vehicles for improving economic performance and creating competitive advantages (Dyer et al., 2008). Following Gulati et al. (2000a), this article describes how network alliances can be an important source of value generation within a firm. However, management of alliances is neither an innate skill nor something that is done effectively by all organizations. Indeed, a firm’s ability to develop and successfully manage its

relationships with other firms may be viewed as a core competence and an important source of competitive advantage (Ritter, Wilkinson, & Johnston, 2004).

Some studies suggest that the failure rate of alliances is nearly 70% (e.g., Wilson, 2008). Networks, it seems, are fragile and fraught with risk in operation and performance. Success is a constant challenge. Lack of governance seems to be a recurring problem with companies not accurately defining a formal strategy for managing network alliances. Others lack a clear idea of what is expected or what they wish to contribute and acquire from the alliance (Thomas, 2014). In this context, network alliances do not necessarily “fail” because they are badly led and managed, but because the framework of the alliance was not clearly defined at the outset.

Thus, networks survive if management pays detailed attention to formal and informal communication tools and methods (Gatignon et al., 2004). The role of senior management is to ensure that the goals described in this article are clearly defined, alliance champions exist within the different organizations, and the alliance is allowed space to develop and grow. While no guarantees exist, it will certainly provide a framework in which organizations can ensure greater returns from their alliances.

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## **Consensus Processes Fostering Relational Trust Among Stakeholder Leaders in a Middle School: A Multi-Case Study\***

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The development of positive relationships and relational trust among adults representing stakeholder groups in schools impacts the culture and character of the environment. Few qualitative applied studies have explored how school leaders foster and maintain trusting relationships among stakeholder leaders to support the consensus process in the educational environment. This study explored how consensus processes foster the development of relational trust among stakeholder leaders in a middle school environment. A multi-case research design was employed. Interviews were conducted with central administrators, building administrators, and teachers in a middle school environment. The interconnectedness of the participants' experiences revealed the central role of relational trust in developing collaborative working relationships among the three stakeholder groups. Leadership was a consistent theme and point of discussion throughout all in-depth interviews. Consensus processes and practices between teachers and administrators may contribute to further building of relational trust among the adult stakeholder groups and further teacher leadership and buy-in on collaborative, hybrid leadership teams with school administrators to tackle sensitive issues.

**Key words:** consensus, middle school, relational trust, school leaders, stakeholder groups

The consensus process involves defining a cooperative practice for members of a group to establish and agree upon a decision that is best for the group (Dressler, 2006). Group members work cooperatively to discover solutions where disagreement is accepted, all voices are heard, and decisions are reached with all members' interests in mind (Baron, 2008). More attention by researchers and practitioners needs to be devoted to developing specific leadership practices for school administrators on building relational trust and developing positive learning and teaching relationships (Redburn, 2009) to support consensus processes among adult stakeholder relationships as part of a school's culture (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Building positive relationships among stakeholder leaders in schools

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is dependent on the development of relational trust among faculty members, staff members, and administrators (Angelle, 2010; Kochanek & Clifford, 2014; Tschannen-Moran, 2009).

Accountability for student success has been at the forefront of educational goals in the past two decades, which includes an emphasis on improving standardized test scores (No Child Left Behind, 2002). Administrators and teachers indicate a feeling of injustice when accountability measures focus on state test results instead of student growth (Roberson, 2014). The result of the administrators' and teachers' feelings is a culture of doubt and mistrust at many schools, particularly among teachers. Due to the increase in accountability measures for teachers, communication difficulties have increased for middle school teachers (Jackson & Lunenburg, 2010). Research has recognized that there is a positive association between student academic success and the presence of relational trust among stakeholder leaders in schools (Daly, Liou, & Moolenaar, 2014; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). However, scholars note that superintendents, principals, and administrators find it difficult to identify methods or tools for developing these foundational relationships (Gomez, Marcoulides, & Heck, 2012).

The consensus process is one of the tools and methods for developing these relationships in the educational environment (Baron, 2008; Redburn, 2009). For consensus decision-making to be effective, all parties need to have a voice, be engaged in the process, and be able to have ideas expressed or considered. Implementation of consensus decision-making practices varies by structure, focus, and processes, though all require time and resources to be successful (Redburn, 2009).

Positive relationships among adults in a school environment are necessary for successful teaching and learning environments (Bangs & Frost, 2012; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). As relationships are the foundation for organizational affiliation (Angelle, 2010; Turan & Bektas, 2013), schools need to develop relational trust among adults in a school environment. Interpersonal trust enhances a school's



social capital, which increases the school's effectiveness (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009).

The transition to middle school is a crucial period in the trajectory of intellectual and psychosocial development (Langhout & Thomas, 2010; Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013) and has been associated with reductions in academic motivation and achievement (Eccles et al., 1993; Ryan et al., 2013; Simmons, 1987). Educational research agendas must continue to focus on stakeholder relationships within the middle school years (Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010), particularly on issues such as hands-on middle school principal leadership to better respond to the developmental needs of the older child and younger adolescent (Georgiou & Kyriakides, 2012).

Schools can benefit from the development of strong professional communities that encourage growth and responsibility for performance (Cranston, 2011). Professional communities also encourage more robust and better quality feedback for teachers by peers and supportive leaders. These frequent opportunities for feedback allow teachers to develop a sense of efficacy among peers and leaders, which help the stakeholder groups build trusting relationships (Cranston, 2011; Kochanek & Clifford, 2014; Zepeda & Mayers, 2013).

School improvement and student achievement are important goals of all school districts. The development of relational trust and consensus decision-making strategies can help establish positive relationships among adults in school, which promote school improvement (Cohen, Fege, & Pickeral, 2009). Strategies for the development of relational trust among adults include frequent formal and informal interactions among members of a group. Research suggests that relational trust must be developed among adults in schools to aid in consensus decision-making processes in the middle school environment (Redburn, 2009; Schneider, Judy, Ebmeyer, & Broda, 2014). School leaders need strategies for the development of relational trust to facilitate school improvement efforts. Trust is developed when consensus processes—in which individuals are able to listen with respect, remove barriers to trust, and provide opportunities with individuals to interact with one another—are implemented (Kochanek & Clifford, 2014). School leaders may

be effective if the focus of efforts is on the regularity, intent, substance, and need of human interactions among stakeholder leaders in schools (Redburn, 2009). The development of positive relationships and relational trust among stakeholder leaders in schools impacts the culture and character of the environment (Angelle, 2010; Caglar, 2011; Daly, 2009; Noonan, Walker, & Kutsyuruba, 2008; Orozco & Allison, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Concomitantly, developing relational trust among faculty members, staff members, and administrators influences student achievement (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010).

Without a consensus among the adults in a school on how to build relational trust, relationships between administrators and teachers turn negative with the potential for ongoing conflict over control in all areas of the organization (Devono & Price, 2012). This lack of relational trust among the stakeholder leaders in a school may lead to a negative school culture, resulting in lower student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2010; Redburn, 2009; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010; Zepeda & Mayers, 2013).

Little has been written in the extant literature identifying a link between consensus processes and relational trust, yet those involved in the use of this practice cite the development of relational trust as an outcome of consensus practices (Bickman, Goldring, De Andrade, Breda, & Goff, 2012; Redburn, 2009; Supovitz et al., 2010). The problem is that specific strategies for developing relational trust among stakeholder leaders in schools have not been identified for school leaders (Noonan, 2014; Sogunro, 2012). Identifying consensus processes that may foster the development of relational trust among stakeholder leaders in school environments has yet to be studied from the stakeholders' perspective.

This qualitative study employed a multi-case research design to explore how consensus processes fostered the development of relational trust among stakeholder leaders in a middle school environment in a suburban school district in Chicago, Illinois. This purpose was met by identifying consensus practices used in a middle school environment, how they were implemented, and whether stakeholder leaders perceived that those practices fostered relational trust among group members. The results and findings of this research are significant

as they provide school and district administrators with strategies for implementing consensus practices in the middle school environment and may support administrators who aspire to build relational trust among adults in an educational environment by concentrating on trust and shared leadership to influence the relationships among those adults (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

## **Literature Review**

### **Stakeholder Theory**

For the purpose of this study, a *stakeholder* is defined as any group or individual that “can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, 46). In the educational environment, stakeholder theory involves multifaceted relationships among stakeholders within the organization (Childress, Elmore, & Grossman, 2006). Stakeholder groups have often attempted to influence a school district’s top leader, the superintendent, by speaking to them directly about topics of interest (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). Superintendents often struggle to find a suitable balance among stakeholder groups. The impact of each stakeholder’s influence is frequently related to the associations they have in the greater community (Schechter, 2011; Yoak & Abdul-Jabbar, 2011).

### **Relational Trust in Schools**

Although the idea of relational trust has grown out of the greater research milieu around trust, the relational trust structure was founded strictly for deciphering social exchanges in the context of schooling organizations, environments, and institutions (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Based on data from the Consortium on Chicago School Research, Bryk and Schneider (2002) operationalized a multilevel theory of relational trust as a crucial structural element in an effective learning organization. *Relational trust* is explained as appearing in relation to and out of the relational social exchanges that give rise to it. Relational trust is characterized as a result of a complex system of interpersonal social exchanges functioning within school settings, which would make relational trust a second-

order variable (Supovitz et al., 2010). The variable of relational trust is significant on the path to school improvement, though it may seem less evident when compared to such school staples as professional development for teachers, attendance rates for teachers, and instructional leadership practices. However, improvements across topics of classroom teaching, curriculum, planning, and professional development have little likelihood of succeeding without advancements in a school's social climate, which is made possible by relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Although school administrators cannot control all the variables that contribute to a school's culture and climate, trust and shared leadership are elements that can be focused on to impact the relationships among adults in schools (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). To build capacity and shared leadership in faculty and staff members, administrators can use verbal and nonverbal communication skills to influence the development of trusting relationships in schools (Slater, 2008).

Developing relational trust among faculty members, staff members, and administrators influences student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2010). School leaders should be aware that national and local demands for accountability of student improvement and test scores may create challenges in relationship and trust building between administrators and faculty members (Chhuon, Gilkey, Gonzalez, Daly, & Chrispeels, 2008).

### **Consensus Principles and Processes**

Consensus building does not necessarily mean reaching undivided agreement. Consensus happens when difference is accepted as a positive force, all voices matter, and conclusions are achieved to the appeal of the group (Dressler, 2006). Susskind and Cruikshank (2006) affirm that the objective of consensus building is to lead to informed consensus wherein all contributors understand the proposal and the subsequent decision. This interpretation of the consensus-building process is in line with Straus (2002), who explained that consensus indicates that all participants will maintain a conclusion, even if they do not individually agree that it is the best choice.

Consensus principles imply commitment and cooperation by participants in a group. Participants are engaged in a process when all members have the opportunity to share needs and concerns (Cranston, 2011). Consensus decision-making shows respect for faculty input and values of stakeholders. To reach consensus, school leaders must create a sense of ownership in the decision-making process that faculty members can accept (Salahuddin, 2010).

Consensus processes are not unanimous decisions, majority votes, or coercive tactics to get a group to agree. The guiding principles of consensus decision-making are implemented in various ways in the educational environment. Faculty member perceptions suggest that a top-down approach to decision-making is not recommended for school and central administrators (Baron, 2008). Decentralized decision-making processes carry the potential for achieving outcomes that are unattainable from centralized structures (Somech, 2010).

The consensus view of school stakeholder relationships is not without criticism. The consensus theory emphasizes a process of decision-making that involves all participants within the school system, including teachers and administrators. Though the goal is to arrive at a consensus of strategies and action plans related to the school mission, linking activities of professional collaboration with the overall positive progress of student achievement can be problematic (Elmore, 2002; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, & Shapley, 2008). The debate centered on the consensus view of professional collaboration involves the issue of whether it should focus on improving the system overall, which limits school or individual decision-making participation (Tang & Choi, 2009), or whether professional development and student learning activities should be the result of the decision-making process among individuals of the school (Webster-Wright, 2009).

### **Leadership Strategies for Consensus Building: The Superintendent's Role**

Due to accountability, the methods of administrators and teachers have been analyzed as a way of recognizing the best practices that will change a low-achieving school to one with the required levels of performance. As a result of this inspection, it has become increasingly obvious that not all youth are obtaining an equal education or opportunities, and not all educators are evolving

into proficient teachers. Bureaucratic accountability has pushed practitioner accountability, which has fostered public accountability. This accountability sequence means schools are obligated to candidly correspond with the stakeholders and collaborate to form relationships that encourage student success, all of which is presently weighted by a single, high-stakes test (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013). The challenge for educational leaders is to determine how to meet the academic requirements of each student so that the achievement gap decreases, while informing stakeholders of the complicated bureaucratic guidelines, the practices put in place to raise student achievement for all students, and the accomplishments in these endeavors (Feuerstein, 2013).

Transparency is particularly critical in public schools due to many issues exposed through the latest accountability directives as well as the economic crunch that has exploded nationwide. School leaders who are transparent support open communication with the community that demonstrates how decisions are made and who makes decisions, which in turn will produce an organization that is less probable to be unethical or controlled by singular interests (Brewer & Smith, 2006). The approach with which a school leader communicates is also critical. A superintendent should identify the many groups of individuals with whom communication is fundamental, then have a strategy for what needs to be conveyed and how in order to uphold a certain appearance, as this will lead to assurance within the community as well as the local board of education (Carlsmith & Railsback, 2001).

### **Administrator and Teacher Consensus**

Consensus must be reached about who takes the leadership role in program delivery to encourage, foster, and sustain student achievement in a school system (Sandholtz & Scribner, 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Effective administrators have characteristics of leadership that are visionary and transformational (Nielsen & Munir, 2009). Transformational leaders create conditions and structures for learning and continuous improvement for children and adults in the school community (Dambe & Moorad, 2008). Effective leaders create strong, schoolwide professional communities that focus on student

achievement. Successful learning communities share a common mission, vision, values, and goals (Nielsen & Munir, 2009).

### **Building Professional Communities in Schools**

School-based professional communities share five characteristics: shared values, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, focus on student learning, and collaboration (Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996). Shared norms and values are the core of the shared beliefs of the institution's purposes, practices, and desired behaviors. With shared norms, teachers are able to develop a moral community for teaching and learning to take place. Reflective dialogue enables teachers to better understand their own learning and abilities in order to improve practice in schools and nurture educational values. Reflective dialogue also promotes empathetic collaboration among the stakeholder groups to develop understandings about students, learning, and pedagogical practices (Louis et al., 1996; Spillane & Kim, 2012). Increased professional dialogue among teachers encourages deprivatization of practice and building of collegial, collaborative relationships (Kruse & Zimmerman, 2012).

### **Consensus Practices in a School's Organizational Culture**

*Organizational culture* describes the agreed-upon rules that govern cognitive and affective aspects of organizational membership (Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011). A school's organizational culture can provide effective tools for teachers and students, effective use of time, data, and adequate school facilities (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). It is the responsibility of administrators to create and nurture a positive and supportive school organizational culture (Behrstock & Clifford, 2009). To sustain a positive school culture, leaders must build organizational capacity by creating learning organizations and supporting professional learning communities (King & Bouchard, 2011). Leaders can promote a positive organizational culture by fostering consensus practices crucial for creating and sustaining successful school systems (Devono & Price, 2012) and establishing a shared vision and goals to encourage shared leadership (Behrstock & Clifford, 2009). Successful distributed leadership should involve

brokering, facilitating, and supporting faculty members' leadership skills (Harris, 2012). The problem that researchers, practitioners, and policymakers need to tackle is how to link the theoretical precepts of the consensus model with the real problems of fostering, adopting, and practicing schoolwide consensus practices (Sandholtz & Scribner, 2006).

Studies (Hawley & Valli, 1999; Sandholtz & Scribner, 2006) indicate that administrators rely mostly on traditional models of professional collaboration or only partially adopt a collaborative model, such as consensus practices, and thus tend to foster competition rather than collaboration among school educators (Baron, 2008; Redburn, 2009). Reasons for such a stance include the need to maintain control as well as a misunderstood perception of teacher expertise, thus devaluing teacher knowledge (Sandholtz & Scribner, 2006). Administrators must allow teachers across the board to exert greater control over the resources needed for student achievement (Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008), professional learning, and classroom practice based on research outcomes (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

### **The Superintendent's Role as a Leader of Stakeholders**

As a result of accountability pressures and the need to increase student achievement, today's superintendents must launch and sustain new reform efforts that require them to work in a collaborative nature with principals, teachers, parents, and other taxpayers to create a shared vision and work toward seeing the vision to its fruition (Feuerstein, 2013; Kowalski, 2005). Communication is vital for superintendents because it is a process through which members of the school organization are able to express their collective beliefs in order to coordinate behaviors and attitudes. Furthermore, as current policies demand transparency and accountability, superintendents must understand politics and be able to involve stakeholders in meaningful political dialogue, build a positive school district image, communicate the need for and garner support for change from the community, and keep the increasingly diverse community and public informed about educational matters (Kowalski, 2005). Understanding the importance of communicating effectively and having the ability to do this is crucial



for superintendents as it is their responsibility to work with local boards, parents, and other community members to set district objectives and priorities, facilitate strategic planning, spearhead fund-raising efforts, and make decisions with regard to programs and curricula (Björk, Glass, & Brunner, 2005).

Accountability and transparency required by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, as well as demanded by the current media-savvy public, call for strong communication between schools and their communities. Research suggests that supporting, practicing, and modeling successful communication activities are essential to student, educator, and organizational success (National School Public Relations Association, 2007). In addition, public schools must have the support of both internal and external stakeholders (Norton et al., 1996, as cited in Edwards, 2007) to be successful. Research also suggests that students perform better when families and communities work with schools and that superintendents increase lines of communication among stakeholders and allow for autonomy at the campus level in order to have a positive impact on student academic achievement (National School Public Relations Association, 2007).

### **Relationship Between Superintendent and the Board of Education**

Frames help leaders evaluate the social order and structure of any organizational system. Superintendents can start to analyze the school district they work for or a new school district to which they might transition through four essential frames: structural frame, human resources frame, political frame, and the symbolic frame (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Today's superintendent must be ready to apply all four, depending on the situation. They must use all the tools available to build trust with the community, staff, and school board members (Schneider et al., 2014). With a clearly defined entry plan, a superintendent communicates the strategies necessary to achieve continual sustainable achievement and academic growth (Daly et al., 2014). All stakeholders will be watching closely to evaluate the success of their superintendent during his or her entry period, and with each goal accomplished or promise kept, the superintendent will gain more support as well as trust in their role (Zepeda & Mayers, 2013).

A superintendent must use a political framework or model for action to guide

board members to make appropriate decisions. To accomplish reform or a successful strategic plan, superintendents need the support of the teachers and, especially, the school board members (Childress et al., 2006). The role of superintendent as a communicator reflects the growing need for superintendents to work collaboratively with all community stakeholders and school district team members (Kowalski, 2005).

### **The Middle School Concept**

There is a lack of research regarding the key players in the middle school environment—students, teachers, principals, and parents—who bear the brunt of the difficulties that middle schools face and are in a position to meet these challenges (D'Angelo, Rich, & Kohm, 2012; Daly et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2014). Since schools are evaluated according to student outcomes—primarily academic achievement—the primary emphasis is on students. Student outcomes also echo the teachers' instructional methods and the school's organizational climate (Caldarella, Shatzer, Gray, Young, & Young, 2011).

### **Method**

The central research question guiding this study was how consensus processes foster the development of relational trust among stakeholder leaders in a middle school environment, focusing on the perceptions of central administrators, building administrators, and teachers. A multi-case study research design was selected to obtain applicable qualitative evidence of building relational trust amongst adults in the middle school environment. The target population was one suburban school district located near Chicago, Illinois. Four central administrators, two building administrators, and four teachers participated in the study, chosen using a focused selection method and purposeful sampling.

The semi-structured interview instrument was adapted from Redburn's (2009) qualitative research on how consensus processes generate relational trust among adults in school environments. Although the development of relational trust using consensus strategies was the focus of Redburn's interviews, the questions did not inquire directly about trust or trust relationships in the schools

(Redburn, 2009). Follow-up questions concerning trust and consensus techniques were asked when, in the course of answering a prepared question, the interviewee referred to trust relationships or any of the facets of trust as identified by Bryk and Schneider (2002) or Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000). Aligning with Redburn's method, three separate interview protocols were used for each stakeholder. The open-ended interview questions were designed to focus the interviewee's responses on how consensus processes foster the development of relational trust among stakeholder leaders in a middle school environment located in Chicago, Illinois.

Data were collected through field notes, interviews, and subject matter expert reflection on the data. To ensure quality control in replicating the research, a comprehensive case study database was used (Yin, 2014). Thematic codes were used to analyze the content of the data collected via interviews. The classified themes were used to triangulate the data. Member checking was also used in the triangulation process to confirm researcher assumptions during the course of the research. Microsoft® Excel was used to log and store collected data and organize the data themes. Cross-case synthesis was used as a data analysis technique, which ensured the validity of the data collected from the individual case studies (Yin, 2014). Cross-case analysis distinguished patterns among the individual cases and determined relationships among variables from the research questions. The analysis of the results yielded data from narratives, tables, and diagrams, which were synthesized into schematic representations of patterns between variables and results. The cross-case analysis was organized by the study's research questions in a summary of findings.

## Findings

The main themes are described and organized around the study's three research questions.

*Research Question 1: How do central administrators perceive consensus processes foster the development of relational trust among stakeholder leaders in a middle school environment?*

Data analysis revealed five themes: consensus practices evolve with succession in leadership; leadership must balance competition for limited resources among stakeholders to build trust; leadership style fosters or minimizes relational trust among stakeholders; consensus practices with parents can be challenging in suburban school districts with abundant financial resources; and consensus-building skills are influenced by family background.

From this group's interviews, it was clear that two of the central administrators had more knowledge and experience with consensus processes and building relational trust than the other central administrators. Interview participants ranged in their responses from an average range of experience to vast experience in relation to consensus practices. All participants interviewed expressed the importance of using consensus practices to develop relational trust among stakeholders of a suburban school district.

*Research Question 2: How do building administrators perceive consensus processes foster the development of relational trust among stakeholder leaders in a middle school environment?*

Data analysis revealed six themes: smaller school districts allow for stronger consensus processes among stakeholders; trust in leadership is key to strong consensus processes among stakeholders; building administrators share decision-making processes with teachers; parents' input is sought on school matters where appropriate; strong tolerance for consensus can lead stakeholders to conflicts; and practicing consensus has contributed to building administrators' personal growth.

The building administrator participants ranged in their use of consensus practices to foster relational trust among stakeholders. Both participants displayed a comfort with the use of consensus processes to foster relational trust among stakeholder groups. They expressed that engaging parents, teachers, and fellow administrators in decision making led to consensus among stakeholders. Though conflicts arose during consensus practices, trust in leadership was key to strong consensus processes among stakeholders.

*Research Question 3: How do teachers perceive consensus processes foster the development of relational trust among stakeholder leaders in a middle school environment?*

Data analysis revealed four themes: teachers perceive they are the primary stakeholders in building relational trust with parents; teachers are stakeholders who must build relational trust with their peers; teachers perceive they must devote an inordinate amount of time to build consensus among all school stakeholders; and collective bargaining and contract negotiations remain a source of mistrust between teachers and administration. The participants also regarded the adoption of consensus practices as important for building relational trust among stakeholder leaders.

## **Discussion**

The findings offered insights reinforced by the extant literature and were used to speak to the three research questions of the study. The study reveals the importance of using consensus practices to develop relational trust among stakeholders within the middle school environment. Findings indicate that some central administrators, building administrators, and teacher leaders have developed their skills with consensus processes within the district. All of the participants in this study utilized consensus practices in their leadership roles in the district. Some of the participants in the study who used consensus practices stated that they were often time consuming, although valuable in practice. To improve consensus processes, participants noted that trust in leadership is key to success, in agreement with the literature (Green & Cooper, 2013; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009). As asserted by the study participants, resistance and mistrust still exists among administrators and teachers related to collective bargaining and teacher contract negotiations. To improve the level of trust among administrators and teachers, participants recommended the use of consensus processes such as interest-based bargaining. In support of these changes, participants mentioned that time and collaborative decision-making will help build a positive culture (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Somech, 2010).

## **Implications and Recommendations**

### **Implications**

The findings of this research were examined and compared to the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational levels of relational trust conceived by Bryk and Schneider (2002) and align closely to findings in the existing literature. The model and the theories surrounding stakeholders (Friedman & Miles, 2006; Verbeke & Tung, 2013) and the role of consensus processes in relational trust among stakeholder leaders (Redburn, 2009) also framed the results of this study.

In this study, the natural leaders within the middle school environment were central administrators, building administrators, and teacher leaders. This study focused specifically on how stakeholders function amongst themselves to build relational trust through consensus processes (Redburn, 2009). Across the three stakeholder groups, several themes were identified among the participants' experiences of using consensus processes to build relational trust. The interconnectedness of experiences revealed the central role of relational trust in developing collaborative working relationships among these three stakeholder groups (Claudet, 2012). Leadership was a consistent theme and point of discussion throughout all 10 in-depth interviews.

The results of this study highlight that aside from professional communication, the daily social exchanges that take place within the role relationships of central administrators to building administrators to teachers were linked to the idea of shared responsibility (Bangs & Frost, 2012), mutual dependency (Angelle, 2010; Harris, 2012), solidarity within stakeholder groups in the midst of intergroup conflict (Choi & Schnurr, 2014), and the role of outer groups within this social system, such as that of parents and students (D'Angelo et al., 2012), in the groups building relational trust amongst themselves.

The results support Bryk and Schneider's (2002) work and indicate that while trust is not the only factor involved in a school's organizational success, schools with little or no trust among stakeholders have failed to foster strong consensus processes among their stakeholder leaders (Redburn, 2009). Additional implications of this study that support Bryk and Schneider is that relational trust

among stakeholder leaders is likely to develop in small schools (Zepeda & Mayers, 2013), the low turnover of the school population increases the likelihood of relational trust among stakeholder leaders (Green & Cooper, 2013), and trust is further nurtured when an open line of communication exists between teacher and parent stakeholder groups (D'Angelo et al., 2012). In direct relation to this study's context, relational trust is an essential part of the middle school culture and must be embedded in the organization through systematic scheduled meetings, workshops, and instructional practice. It should also be a point of discussion and recognition among school stakeholder leaders (Kochanek & Clifford, 2014; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009).

A further implication of the findings is that the concept of time is a unique issue for building consensus practices leading to relational trust among stakeholder leaders in a school organization. Another implication is that leaders must be educated and work to understand this process, whether it must be applied to daily school functioning or greater social matters (Bangs & Frost, 2012; Tschannen-Moran, 2014) such as contract terms in teachers' collective bargaining for better salary and benefits. In turn, building administrators must have an acute awareness of their teachers' strengths and weaknesses as well as professional and personal qualities, which will in turn either nurture a trusting working relationship or cause its demise (Green & Cooper, 2013; Harris, 2012).

The implications of the results move beyond the models created by Bryk and Schneider (2002) and also support stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), which Redburn (2009) used to develop the model of consensus processes among stakeholders. The results imply that the use of consensus practices among educational leaders increases the relational trust among stakeholder leaders (Cranston, 2011; Redburn, 2009).

Another critical point in the findings was a tendency of teachers to mistrust parents and label them as "difficult" and "aggressive", and the conclusion that these parents behave as such because they are part of an "affluent" district. Teachers' lack of willingness for power sharing with parents and teachers' classist labeling of this group of parents may be reactions to other issues, such

as anger about collective bargaining conflicts and teacher burnout—factors identified by Smith and Flores (2014) in analyzing mistrust among stakeholder leaders in middle schools.

To improve consensus processes, participants noted that trust in leadership is key to success (Green & Cooper, 2013; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009). The amount of experience and knowledge that educational leaders have related to consensus processes has been shown to be a primary influence in building trust among stakeholders (Choi & Schnurr, 2014; Zepeda & Mayers, 2013). Establishing consensus processes and practices between teachers and administrators may also contribute to further building of relational trust among the adult stakeholder groups (Claudet, 2012), further teacher leadership (Bergman, Rentsch, Small, Davenport, & Bergman, 2012), and buy-in on collaborative, hybrid leadership teams with school administrators to tackle sensitive issues such as teachers' collective bargaining (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). Thus, for central administrators and building administrators seeking to nurture teacher leadership with students, establishing collaborative leadership teams must be seen as a priority in a school's organizational strategic initiatives. Finally, relational trust among stakeholder leaders in a school organization must consider both the inward and outward experiences of practitioners (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Kochanek & Clifford, 2014).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Learning partnerships between central administrators and building administrators/principals merit further exploration. Researchers could focus specifically on the work practices involved in these relationships (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Further exploration could be done in the area of administrative/school leaders' professional learning communities to explore and strengthen leadership skills and professional practices among the central office administration and building administration (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014). Further research could also include practice-focused explorations such as the use of faculty learning communities to support professional teaching practices in the educational community (Moore & Carter-Hicks, 2014; Tam, 2015).



**Recommendations for Further Research**

Though the qualitative data generated from the study variables were highly detailed with quality descriptions of participant anecdotes, the study was limited in size and scope. Further research that provides a deeper inquiry into the use and effect of consensus practices in schools is warranted. Further research is also needed on the role of educational leaders in cultivating trust between teachers and parents as well as addressing how teachers' challenges within the school environment can be negotiated in both ethical and respectful ways. In addition, future research should contribute to the toolbox of skills and strategies necessary for effective group and school leadership (Whitt, Scheurich, & Skrla, 2015). In this study, the participants were from a homogeneous group from a small suburban school district in Chicago. Therefore, future studies could expand on this and explore how stakeholder groups perceive that consensus processes develop relational trust across multiple school districts, large school districts, and in ethnically diverse communities.

**Conclusion**

This research addressed how consensus processes foster the development of relational trust among stakeholder leaders in a middle school environment in a suburban school district in Chicago. This investigation has contributed to and continued the larger scholarly conversation on school leaders fostering teacher-administrator consensus. Several themes were identified among the participants' experiences of using consensus processes to build relational trust among the three stakeholder groups—central administrators, building administrators, and teachers. The interconnectedness of experiences revealed the central role of relational trust in developing collaborative working relationships among these three stakeholder groups (Claudet, 2012). Leadership was a consistent theme and point of discussion throughout all 10 in-depth interviews. The implications from this study's findings include that establishing consensus processes and practices between teachers and administrators may contribute to further building of relational trust among the adult stakeholder groups (Claudet, 2012), further

teacher leadership (Bergman et al., 2012), and buy-in on collaborative, hybrid leadership teams with school administrators to tackle sensitive issues such as teachers' collective bargaining (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013).

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## **How Followers Determine the Character and Care of Their Assigned Leaders: A Quantitative Study from the Field of Education\***

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Research demonstrates conclusively that trust is a vital component in the development of strong leadership. Recently, 488 mainly female current participants and recent graduates of an online and blended Master of Education degree program were surveyed about their perceptions of their instructors' character and concern for them as individuals. The results of the study indicate that the qualities and characteristics that graduate students most seem to prefer in their instructional leaders include interacting with them as individuals, remembering their individual needs, and acting consistently in a compassionate manner. Conversely, the qualities and characteristics that most damage a course leader's character in the eyes of his or her students include acting in a manner that communicates a lack of concern for individual needs; being disrespectful, rude, critical, uncaring, or harsh toward the class; presenting biased attitudes; and declining to help followers in obvious need.

**Key words:** follower evaluation of leaders, follower-leader relationships, leader character, trust in leaders

Recent research concludes almost universally that student-teacher relationships are foundational for greater instructional effectiveness and its concomitant increase in overall student achievement or learning (Cornelius-White, 2007). Similarly, research demonstrates conclusively that trust is a vital component in the development of strong relationships (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). Given these findings, course leaders at all levels would benefit from knowing which personal qualities and characteristics increase follower trust.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

Most, if not all, educators would state that they strive to be relational in their teaching, that they care about their students, and that they lead their courses appropriately through character and compassion. The purpose of this study was to determine whether this commonly stated belief is evident to students. In other

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words, do students experience the care and compassion that their professors espouse? Is the character that course leaders claim apparent to their pupils?

This purpose is vital for two primary reasons. First, as shown below, the care, character, and compassion that instructors advocate have been repeatedly and invariably proven essential for higher levels of student success. If these qualities, though embraced as values by course leaders, are not fully and authentically implemented in practice, then significant student achievement and influence is lost. Second, education is not merely cognitive development; it has moral dimensions (Slavin, 2012). Classroom leaders possess significant influence on students' ethical development; this influence is diminished when personal disregard, cold-heartedness, or lack of character are more evident to students than kindness and integrity, especially if the teacher previously insisted that he or she was student centered. Clearly, the topic of student-teacher relationships in this era of increasing scrutiny, accountability, community, and governmental investment is vital. Additional empirical study is certainly warranted.

The following foundational research questions were posed to fulfill this purpose:

*Research Question 1: What qualities, characteristics, and teacher behaviors promote a student's greatest recognition of a course leader's character and compassion toward him or her?*

*Research Question 2: When the student-teacher relationship is damaged, what qualities, characteristics, and teacher behaviors most limit a student's perception of a course leader's character and compassion?*

## **Literature Review**

The existing literature on this topic is both thorough and consistent. When individuals assess the overall effectiveness of their leaders, several leadership characteristics often seem to dominate. This study not only reinforces these past findings, but augments them with additional and beneficial findings. The most current research indicates that the importance of character to leadership simply cannot be overemphasized. Crossnan, Gandz, and Seijts (2012) state plainly that "without integrity leaders cannot build good relationships with followers, with their

organizational superiors, with allies or partners. Every promise has to be guaranteed and the resulting mistrust slows down decisions and actions” (“The Ten Virtues of a Cross-Enterprise Leader,” para. 2).

### **Characteristics of Good Leadership**

Kouzes and Posner’s (2010) recent popular meta-analysis of leadership research provides 10 foundational characteristics of good leadership. Half of these fundamental traits of effective leadership focus on the ability of the leader to garner and maintain trust with her or his subordinates. These trust-based leadership characteristics include values, credibility, vision, modeling, compassion, and trust itself (Kouzes & Posner, 2010). In other words, followers simply must know that they can place their trust solidly with their leader. A comparable meta-analytic study by Dirks and Ferrin (2002) similarly revealed that trust for a leader has advantageous results for an organization. Satisfaction among subordinates and increased commitment to required tasks grow from trust in a leader. These researchers also determined that followers who trust their leader are more apt to stay with that leader and will accept her or his decisions more readily.

While the issues of character and trust in leadership are indeed crucial, some researchers have recently endeavored to specify what leadership qualities and traits comprise integrity in a leader. These leadership characteristics include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to individual development, and community building (Spears, 2010). These findings are consistent with those of a very large-scale meta-analysis of student-teacher relationships by Cornelius-White (2007). He determined that empathy and warmth were the two most productive ways to build and strengthen relationships between course leaders and their followers.

### **Path-Goal Leadership Theory and the Student-Teacher Relationship**

Several facets of path-goal leadership theory intersect with the above discussion. In essence, the *path-goal theory* states that a leader’s behavior varies according to the overall motivation and performance of his or her

followers. The theory later evolved to include the idea a leader acts to complement the subordinates' strengths and offset their weaknesses. This theory is comprised of 26 propositions, not all of which are meaningful to this study. However, several of the propositions, specifically those that focus on supportive leader behavior, refer directly to issues addressed by this research and focus on matters of character and compassion on the part of the classroom leader (House, 1996). According to House (1996):

When subordinates' tasks . . . are . . . stressful or frustrating, supportive leader behavior will lead to increased subordinate effort and satisfaction by enhancing leader subordinate relationships and self-confidence, lowering stress and anxiety, and compensating for unpleasant aspects of the work. (340–341)

In addition to this focus on supportive leader behavior, path–goal leadership theory also emphasizes *value-based leadership*, which includes the components or attitudes of vision, passion, confidence, intrinsic motivation, risk taking, high expectations, symbolic behaviors, and positive evaluation. Under this definition, whenever followers (or students) have an opportunity for moral involvement, a leader (or teacher) can have a tremendous impact on motivation by exerting the values identified above (House, 1996).

### **Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and Course Leadership**

Like path–goal leadership, leader–member exchange (LMX) theory has numerous connections to this current study. *LMX theory* is a leadership paradigm based on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers (Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999). Several of the hypotheses that form that foundation of LMX are consistent with the general findings within this article, including the following hypotheses by Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, and Ferris (2012):

- “*Hypothesis 2b*: Transformational leadership is positively related to follower perceptions of LMX” (1722).
- “*Hypothesis 2d*: Leader extraversion and agreeableness are positively related to follower perceptions of LMX” (1723).
- “*Hypothesis 3b*: Leader affect or liking is positively related to follower perceptions of LMX” (1724).

- “Hypothesis 3e: Leader trust is positively related to follower perceptions of LMX” (1725).

### **Trust and Trustworthiness and Their Influences on Student Performance**

The issue of trust, which, though not initially considered as a specific research question, was nonetheless emphasized in the current study’s findings and is therefore deserving of consideration here. *Trust* is defined as “an individual’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party on the basis of a positive expectation of the actions of the other party” (Korsgaard, Brower, & Lester, 2015, 47). While the literature defines trust very simply, the concept remains challengingly complex. Researchers understand its role within the leader–follower dyadic relationship, but even this seemingly simplistic truth is “muddied” by questions about asymmetric trust, wherein individuals within a relationship have different levels of trust (Korsgaard, Brower, & Lester, 2015).

Recent research expands the impact of trust in organizations to include numerous previously neglected dimensions. In this expanding understanding of trust, leaders, including course leaders like teachers or instructors, can increase trust in their environment through demonstrable ability, genuine benevolence, and obvious integrity. Another trust-enhancing factor is time. While a follower’s judgment about his or her leader’s ability and integrity may form quickly, the follower’s (or student’s) assessment of the leader’s benevolence will evolve over time, and the two concepts are directly related: as the leader’s perceived benevolence increases, so does his or her perceived integrity. As might be expected, when trust in an organization or classroom grows, so does risk taking (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007).

Finally, a comparison between the current study and a related study (Pate & Angell, 2013) on how academic leaders as subordinates respond to their own leaders provides strong confirmation for the current study’s overall findings. Their survey of 162 college leaders found that three of the top five most highly valued leadership traits referenced trust or integrity in some way. These very prized leadership traits were honesty, integrity, and fairness. The only two highly rated traits not related in some way to character were communication and listening. In



addition, two of the top four leadership mistakes most deplored by these college leaders included being dishonest and acting unethically. The other two highly rated leadership mistakes were blaming others for personal failure and taking credit for others' ideas—each of which certainly has character-related elements.

As might be expected, trust does not just engender psychologically beneficial relationships; trust is essential for beneficial organizational outcomes. In a fascinating 2010 study, Boyce, Jackson, and Neal found that follower–leader relationships characterized by rapport, trust, commitment, compatibility, and credibility were instrumental in organizations achieving greater success. This study specifically determined that leadership coaches who had the most job-related credibility caused significantly improved program outcomes.

Clearly, trust is vital for both personal and organizational success, but how is it developed? How is trust grown between a course leader and his or her students? One possible approach can be found in the natural mentoring nature of the relationship between the teacher and his or her student. Flieg-Palmer and Schoorman (2011) found that a trusting relationship between the teacher as mentor and the student resulted in a much more efficient transfer of knowledge.

The current study, which used a quantitative survey combined with supporting qualitative respondent comments, reflects the findings briefly summarized above. In essence, as indicated above, I found that instructional leaders must not just claim integrity and character but must act consistently in ways that demonstrate honesty, compassion, and fairness to all.

## **Method**

For this study, 488 current participants and recent graduates of an online and blended Master of Education degree program (enrollment of approximately 700 students) provided by a mid-sized, private, and religious Midwestern university were surveyed about their perceptions of their course leaders' character and concern for them as individuals. Survey respondents were primarily public school teachers, approximately 25 to 35 years of age on average, and approximately

70% were female. The survey was delivered electronically, and the response rate was approximately 65%.

A survey developed for this study was piloted with two course sections of graduate students: one section of students with the researcher and one section of students unknown to the researcher. Both the researcher's and the other students' opinions about the initial draft of the survey, which were similar, were used to improve the survey's clarity and function before its final use. In general, students commented that the original survey was too "religious." There were also specific concerns about the phrasing of some questions. After student-requested corrections and improvements were made, the survey was again provided to students for a final review. Upon the approval of this revised draft, the survey was determined to be ready for administration.

The survey sought to answer the previously stated research questions and included the following course leader qualities or characteristics: "develops meaningful relationships with cohort members, interacting with cohort members as individuals"; "shows sincere concern for students and remembering their needs"; and "exhibits a life of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, and goodness." Students rated these qualities on a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 = no importance, 2 = little importance, 3 = some importance, and 4 = high importance to them in their evaluation of their course leader's character and concern for them as an individual. In addition to the Likert-type scale responses, students were also asked to comment about the questions and their experiences related to the survey's topic. Finally, current students and recent graduates were also asked if any instructional leaders "failed" to exhibit sufficient character and compassion. Their responses yielded specific information about developing trust to improve the vital student-teacher relationship. While a very intentional effort was made to keep the survey short so that working professionals—most of whom were classroom teachers themselves—could complete it quickly, several questions within the survey were comparable enough to allow for reliability.

## Results

The overall average rating for all qualities was 2.625, indicating that students perceived that all aspects of a course leader's character are highly important; however, students made a clear distinction between merely talking about caring and actually demonstrating acts of genuine and individualized concern. When students were asked about the importance of a course leader stating his or her positive intentions, the average rating was 1.996, indicating that the topic held almost exactly "some importance" (2.0). The highest rated quality, "shows sincere concern for students and remembers their needs," averaged 2.746.

Table 1 provides rating averages for all the initial qualities on the survey. Along with the quantitative average ratings of leader qualities, supporting qualitative comments from followers "tell the story" of developing trust in leadership communicatively and simply. In determining a professor's character and concern for them, students, as might be expected, consistently and strongly preferred deeds to words. Again, while they perceived that speaking kind words to a class to be of some importance ( $M = 2.004$ ), they insisted that exhibiting qualities of compassion and patience was much more valuable ( $M = 2.690$ ).

**Table 1: Course Leader Quality Ratings**

Qualities	<i>M</i>
Course leader's states his or her intentions.	1.996
Course leader's speaks in congenial words to the class.	2.004
Course leader interacts with students as individuals.	2.631
Course leader remembers individual student needs.	2.746
Course leader integrates compassion into course content.	2.130
Course leader provides compassionate advice and guidance.	2.159
Course leader acts consistently in a compassionate manner.	2.690

Student comments under this section reinforced these survey results. Many students found a professor's compassion for individual needs to be most refreshing. One wrote:

Within my cohort, there were a few occasions where a member of the group might have a family issue they were trying to deal with in addition to their schoolwork. It was comforting to find that the professors were both understanding and compassionate.

Another passionately commented:

I especially remember our [faculty] advisor saying that during our short time together, some of us would experience life-altering experiences. He was so right! We had a divorce, a cancer diagnosis, a birth, heart surgery, an adoption—and we supported each other through all of these things. He was tough, but he was very caring.

A third student wrote:

Early in my MEd program, a teacher I worked closely with at my school died suddenly. I was devastated, and both the professor and the cohort played an active role in helping me to move through the grief process. They were not my only support system, but they were an important piece of it.

Approximately 21% of the survey respondents indicated that they had had a negative experience with a teacher and perceived that the teacher lacked character or concern for them as individuals. These respondents answered additional questions in an effort to determine which teacher qualities and characteristics most damage trust between the student and his or her course leader. The lowest rated quality, “uses coarse or inappropriate language,” seemed to have little impact on a student’s impression of a teacher’s trustworthiness or overall character ( $M = 1.229$ ); conversely, the two highest rated qualities, averaging 2.037 and 1.888 respectively, focused on the course leader’s lack of concern for individual student needs and his or her disrespectful, rude, critical, uncaring, or harsh behaviors toward the class. Similarly highly rated concerns included the course leader’s display of biased attitudes ( $M = 1.757$ ) and his or her avoidance of helping students in need ( $M = 1.623$ ). Table 2 on the next page provides specific ratings for all negative qualities by individuals who felt their course leader failed to exhibit appropriate character.

**Table 2: Quality Ratings for Students Who Questioned the Character of Their Instructional Leader**

Survey Question	M
Course leader ignores or is uncaring about needs.	2.037
Course leader acts rudely or harshly toward students.	1.888
Course leader does not include character issues in content.	1.860
Course leader displays biased attitudes toward students.	1.757
Course leader ignores opportunities to meet students' non-academic needs.	1.623
Course leader claims strong personal character and integrity.	1.575
Course leader uses course or inappropriate language while teaching.	1.229

Students with bad experiences in this area were exceptionally passionate. One commented:

This doctor was racially biased and rude and criticized those students who were of the Caucasian race. Any student who was of color or mixed race was treated differently. We complained to the president about him, and he was removed from our class. However, the experience was damaging because we never fully covered the information that was supposed to be conveyed.

Another student wrote: "I had one very uncaring, unsupportive, and very rude professor who made us feel inadequate and was not responsive to our needs. She lashed out when someone tried to speak up." Finally, one student was very upset about what he or she perceived to be unfair treatment by a course leader, writing:

I had one professor who did not keep her word with me. . . . She also changed the due date on the research paper because 85% of the cohort complained that they were too busy. Another cohort member and I had our papers done because we managed our time well. I also had another professor who told me I didn't understand the English language on two or three occasions. The words I used had multiple meanings, but he wouldn't listen to what I had to say. I did not enjoy his class at all. It was frustrating because he made excuses for his behavior and way of conducting the class.

Survey questions that focused on a course leader's words showed significant correlation. The two most similar qualities on the survey were the teacher's stated intentions to be caring and to act with integrity and to offer kind and supportive words to the class. The responses to these two questions were strongly correlated,  $r(488) = .78$ ,  $p < .01$ . Similarly, two comparable survey

qualities focused on a course leader's actions—developing meaningful relationships and remembering and acting upon the needs of individual students—were also correlated. Survey responses to these two questions were strongly to moderately correlated,  $r(488) = .62, p < .01$ .

An inferential statistical review of the data supports the previous discussion that students are much more concerned about what a course leader *does* to reflect compassion and character, rather than what he or she says. Table 3 compares responses on individual questions, based on their general topic—words versus actions—to the opposite category's overall average by each respondent. In other words, was there a significant difference in the way that individual students responded to questions between whether those questions were focused on a professor's words or his or her actions toward them?

**Table 3: t-Test Results Comparing Responses According to Word vs. Action**

Question	Category	t-cal	t-crit	df
Course leader's states his or her intentions.	words	1.6	15.1	487
Course leader's speaks in congenial words to the class.	words	1.6	15.4	487
Course leader integrates compassion into content.	words	1.7	12.2	487
Course leader interacts with students as individuals.	actions	1.6	13.6	487
Course leader remembers individual student needs.	actions	1.6	17.4	487
Course leader provides compassionate guidance.	actions	1.6	3.6	487
Course leader acts in a compassionate manner.	actions	1.6	16.7	487

All survey questions showed a statistically significant difference between the way students respond to a course leader's claims of compassion and character and the way they respond to a course leader's actual actions that portray compassion and character toward them. Clearly, both descriptive and inferential statistics and quantitative and qualitative data confirm that students place much less value on a course leader's words than on his or her actions.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study yield several contributions to practice and generate several theoretical implications. Practitioners, especially those involved in initial teacher training and development, should strongly emphasize the need for behaviors that reflect character and compassion. These actions are far more beneficial for followers than mere spoken expressions. Similarly, course leaders who damage trust with their followers do so more destructively through deeds that betray a lack of genuine concern than through harsh or coarse words.

Multiple theoretical implications arise from the results of this study. Teacher training and teacher evaluation have historically focused almost exclusively on teacher instructional or academic performance. These are, of course, worthy goals for preparation and assessment; however, the learner–leader relationship and formal education have other vital dimensions that should be considered.

## **Contributions to Practice**

This study indicates several beneficial behaviors for an academic leader to develop more meaningful relationships with learners and presents several topics for greater research and deeper consideration. The personal qualities and characteristics that graduate students most seem to prefer in their course leaders when evaluating his or professors' character and integrity include interacting with students as individuals, remembering individual student needs, and acting consistently in a compassionate manner. The data indicate that students are much less "impressed" by what a professor may claim about integrity or compassion. Conversely, the qualities and characteristics that most damage a graduate instructor's character in the eyes of his or her students include acting in a manner that communicates a lack of concern for individual student needs; being disrespectful, rude, critical, uncaring, or harsh toward the class; presenting biased attitudes; and declining to help students in obvious need.

As previously stated, the student–teacher relationship is paramount to improved academic achievement, and this study provides specific and actionable approaches to fostering positive relationships and avoiding conflict in

relationship. The conscientious course leader should seek to “practice what he or she preaches.” Certainly, informing students of one’s compassion and character verbally is acceptable, but these statements must be supported by concrete actions that demonstrate their veracity. Students expect course leaders to know them as individuals and respond graciously to their individual needs. Conversely, course leaders should be aware that this vital relationship between themselves and their students can be significantly damaged, thereby concomitantly damaging student academic performance, when the teacher ignores or is otherwise uncaring about individual student needs or acts in a rude or harsh manner toward students.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Numerous meaningful theoretical implications arise from this study. First, it is possible that the incredible importance of the student–teacher relationship (compassion) and the need for integrity (character) in course leadership may not be properly presented in the teacher training process. Significant attention is certainly paid to teacher disposition, but as this study demonstrates, fully one in five students may experience a course leader with a perceived lack of compassion or integrity. Perhaps teacher training institutions should consider even greater emphasis on the vital role and seeming tenuousness of the student–teacher relationship.

Second, current educational practice seems to emphasize a teacher evaluation paradigm based on student achievement, and while this focus is appropriate, it is likely that its exclusive focus on data and results misses a vital element—the necessary foundation of a strong relationship between learners and their course leaders before that achievement can be maximized. This study indicates that students are very aware of how they are treated by their professors, and this treatment has a tremendous impact on their overall motivation to learn and their ultimate success at learning.

Third, schools have always had a primary purpose of academic development of students, but they have also had numerous secondary purposes, such as socialization and character education. As important mentors in the lives of



students, course leaders bear a unique responsibility to model for students the behaviors society expects of them. When teachers dismiss a student's individual needs as unimportant, he or she may then repeat those behaviors outside of the classroom, increasing incivility in a community. Instead, as this research indicates, students are very responsive when course leaders don't just speak about caring, but actually exhibit that concern in real ways.

### **Limitations**

This study has some limitations. First, the respondents were primarily from the Midwest, all were of similar age, most were female, all were working in the same professional field of education, and all held the same professional role of classroom teacher. It is not only possible but likely that these demographic similarities result in survey findings that are applicable more to those with similar backgrounds than those without. While the sample size was large and the response rate was positive, the applicability of the findings to a wider setting can reasonably be questioned because the respondents' experiences were so seemingly similar.

Second, the survey was intended to determine how effective a specific, private, religious institution was in practically conveying the values of character and compassion it espoused. As a result, the survey questions reflected the language and biases of the university. For example, as previously mentioned, one quality on the survey was "exhibits a life of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, and goodness." This phrasing comes directly from the Bible, which reads: "but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Gal 5:22–23 English Standard Version). While these words apply to more than just religious contexts, because the survey respondents were attending a private Christian college where this verse would have been well known, it is likely that their rating of this and other similar qualities on the survey was influenced by this shared knowledge.

Third, a very limited number of respondents commented that the survey's focus was misplaced. These individuals did not see how a leader's character or

compassion were relevant to their work as instructional followers; they intended to do their best and pursue their own potential regardless of the integrity or compassion exhibited by their course leaders. One respondent commented that one's compassion for his or her students has "absolutely no bearing on the abilities of the individual instructor to construct and deliver effective classroom material." Another wrote, "The fact is [instructor character] was unimportant to me. Whether the instructor showed his or her [compassion] was irrelevant and actually uncalled for in the setting." While this opposition to the survey may not have caused it to be poorly answered by these few respondents, their dissatisfaction with the instrument should be noted.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Since this study focused exclusively on Midwestern female schoolteachers, a follow-up study that explores leader–follower trust among a more widely represented population would be beneficial. Teachers are considered very people-oriented and may possess a bias toward preferring that type of leadership. Would a comparable survey conducted among less relational professions yield different results? Do scientists or accountants, just as random examples, value trust in their leaders as much as educators do? Along these lines, do Midwesterners respond to leadership more positively if that leadership is compassionate and genuine? Would a similar survey among educators or non-educators in the South, Northeast, or even Central Asia generate different findings, or is this preference for character in leadership universal?

Second, while this study had a clear demographic pool of survey respondents, it also had a clear philosophical foundation, that of a private Christian university seeking to fulfill a specific sectarian mission. Perhaps individuals who select a strongly evangelical college expect their faculty members not just to express concern for them but to act supportively and honestly as well. Do all learners, both religious and those irreligious, have the same desire for character and compassion in their course leaders? Would individuals from a completely secular field perceive the need for compassion and character in their leaders differently?

Third, the study started from a foundational assumption that caring for students and acting with integrity was vital for leaders. Some respondents simply rejected this. Another study digging more deeply into these sentiments would be very interesting. How many students function well without knowing or caring that their course leaders care for them as individuals? What “replaces” character and compassion as primary motivators for these unique learners? Do they really believe that the compassion and character of their teachers adds little value to their learning?

Finally, these results prompt additional related topics to consider for future study. Since the qualities contained in the study were confined to a specific need within a private, religious university, a follow-up survey with more general questions or qualities would be beneficial. Also, since the respondents were all adult professionals working full time in a demanding career, their results may reflect that life experience; broader survey demographics may provide other helpful information. Finally, the extensive survey results themselves are deserving of additional disaggregation. For example, the survey data also include demographic information about the instructional modality students experienced. It would be fascinating to know whether online students perceive the caring and integrity of their course leaders differently. The survey also asked students how long ago their learning experience was. Another interesting research question might be whether or not students’ perceptions of instructor character and compassion evolve over time.

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