

Utilizing the Organizational Leadership Assessment as a Strategic Tool for Increasing the Effectiveness of Teams within Organizations

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Abstract

The Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA) has rapidly become a standard in servant leadership research. Based on new findings the researcher argues that the OLA may be utilized as a strategic tool for increasing the effectiveness of teams in organizations. Toward this end, the following is presented: (a) a review of the relevant literature, (b) a survey and presentation of the new research correlating team effectiveness with OLA measures, (c) a theoretical model for understanding the use of the OLA as a strategic tool for increasing the effectiveness of teams, and (d) recommendations for leadership researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: Leadership, Teams, Organizations, Assessment, Effectiveness, Team Effectiveness

Introduction

For researchers and practitioners alike, the topic of teams permeates organizational thought in this first decade of the 21st century. Because of this perceived reality, it is increasingly important to understand how the effectiveness of organizational teams may be improved, and what type of leadership can best facilitate such improvement. Due to the findings in recent research on the relationship between servant leadership and the effectiveness of teams (Irving, 2004), there is reason to believe that servant leadership is a key variable contributing to team effectiveness.

As an instrument that measures servant leadership in the organizational context, the Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA) may be utilized as a strategic tool for increasing the effectiveness of teams in organizations. In order to explore this further, the following will be addressed in this article: (a) a review of the literature surrounding servant leadership, the OLA, and team effectiveness, (b) a survey and presentation of the new research connecting the OLA and team effectiveness, (c) a theoretical model for understanding the use of the OLA as a strategic tool for increasing the effectiveness of teams, and (d) recommendations for leadership researchers and practitioners who are interested in improving the effectiveness of teams in organizations.

Literature Review: Servant Leadership

Nearly every review of the contemporary literature on servant leadership begins with Greenleaf (1977). In this seminal work, Greenleaf makes the argument that by definition servant leaders are to be servants first, for it is the proven record of service that provides the basis by which the led choose those who they will follow. On this point Greenleaf notes that, "a new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader" (pp. 23-24). To put it more directly, in Greenleaf's framework, "The servant-leader *is* servant first" (p. 27), for followers will "*freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants*" (p. 24). In light of such an understanding of leadership, it will increasingly become important for servant leadership researchers to examine servant leadership from the follower perspective, a point given some treatment by Hebert (2004).

Beyond Greenleaf, theoretical pieces directly and indirectly related to servant leadership continue to emerge (e.g., Graham, 1991; Spears, 1995; Quay, 1997; Spears, 1998; Blanchard, 1998; Buchen, 1998; Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Laub, 1999; McGee-Copper & Looper, 2001; Russell, 2001; Spears & Lawrence, 2002; Jennings & Stahl-Wert, 2003; Laub, 2003; Patterson, 2003; Sendjava, 2003; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2003; Winston, 2003; Wong, 2003; Cerff, 2004; Drury, 2004; Hale, 2004; Helland, 2004; Hebert, 2004; Irving, 2004; Laub, 2004; Ndoria, 2004; Nwogu, 2004; Page, 2004; Parolini, 2004; Patterson & Stone, 2004; Ulrich, 2004; Winston & Hartsfield, 2004; Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Winston, 2004). While contributions to the field are increasing, a majority of these contributions are theoretical in nature. Thankfully the emergence of empirical studies in

recent years is strengthening the discipline as more is discovered about servant leadership and its associated themes.

Most of the work surrounding servant leadership from the mid-1990's through 2003 focused on identifying themes that could help to operationalize the concept of servant leadership. Table 1 is provided to illustrate some of these efforts.

Table 1
Operational Themes of Servant Leadership

The Servant Leader...	
Graham (1991)	Inspirational, Moral
Buchen (1998)	Self-Identity, Capacity for Reciprocity, Relationship Builders, Preoccupation with the Future
Spears (1998)	Listening, Empathy, Healing, Awareness, Persuasion Conceptualization, Foresight, Stewardship, Commitment
Farling, Stone, & Winston (1999)	Vision, Influence, Credibility, Trust, Service
Laub (1999)	Valuing People, Developing People, Building Community, Displaying Authenticity, Provides Leadership, Shares Leadership
Russell (2001)	Vision, Credibility, Trust, Service, Modeling, Pioneering, Appreciation of Others, Empowerment
Patterson (2003)	Agapao Love, Humility, Altruism, Vision, Trust, Empowerment, Service

* Adapted and updated from Sendjaya's (2003) table of servant leadership themes.

Through these efforts, several prominent themes have emerged, and a solid foundation has been laid for a new wave of servant leadership research. One of the servant leadership measures that arose out of these efforts was the Organizational Leadership Assessment (Laub, 1999). As a valid and reliable measure of servant leadership, the OLA has appropriately been utilized in many of the recent servant leadership empirical studies (e.g., Hebert, 2004; Irving, 2004). I turn now to a more specific focus on the OLA.

Literature Review: The OLA

In order to understand the design and structure of the OLA, it is important to understand the definitional framework within which Laub (1999) is operating. For Laub, the essence of servant leadership may be defined in this manner: "Servant leadership is

an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader” (p. 81). From Laub’s perspective, placing the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader may be operationalized through the following six variables: (a) valuing people, (b) developing people, (c) building community, (d) displaying authenticity, (e) providing leadership, and (f) sharing leadership. These are the six scales in the OLA that measure servant leadership. Table 2 provides an overview of Laub’s six primary characteristics of servant leadership, along with three associated descriptors for each of the scales.

Table 2
*Laub’s OLA Model**

The Servant Leader...	
<i>Values People</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By believing in people • By serving other’s needs before his or her own • By receptive, non-judgmental listening
<i>Develops People</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By providing opportunities for learning and growth • By modeling appropriate behavior • By building up others through encouragement and affirmation
<i>Builds Community</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By building strong personal relationships • By working collaboratively with others • By valuing the differences of others
<i>Displays Authenticity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By being open and accountable to others • By a willingness to learn from others • By maintaining integrity and trust
<i>Provides Leadership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By envisioning the future • By taking initiative • By clarifying goals
<i>Shares Leadership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By facilitating a shared vision • By sharing power and releasing control • By sharing status and promoting others

* Laub (2003)

Moving beyond the characteristics of servant leaders, Laub (2003) defines the servant organization as an, “organization in which the characteristics of servant leadership are displayed through the organizational culture and are valued and practiced by the leadership and workforce” (p. 3). Because the OLA is designed to

measure servant leadership at the organizational level, the OLA has been used widely to assess the general health of organizations. Depending on an organization's score on the OLA, an organization is placed in one of six organization health designations—Org¹ through Org⁶. Laub argues that these six levels of organizational health characterize three broad categories of organizational leadership. First, Org¹ and Org² represent the presence of *autocratic leadership* characterized by the leader as dictator, putting the needs of the leader first, and the leader treating others as servants. Second, Org³ and Org⁴ represent the presence of *paternalistic leadership* characterized by the leader as parent, putting the needs of the organization first, and the leader treating others as children. Finally, Org⁵ and Org⁶ represent the presence of *servant leadership* characterized by the leader as steward, putting the needs of the led first, and the leader treating others as partners. This threefold understanding is referred to as the A-P-S (Autocratic-Paternalistic-Servant) Model.

Literature Review: Team Effectiveness

While servant leadership has been researched in light of several variables—Job Satisfaction most prominently—servant leadership has received only minimal treatment in examining its relationship to team effectiveness (Irving, 2004). This issue becomes particularly important since the topic of teams and groups continues to hold such a strong presence in both organizational practice and within the contemporary literature (e.g., West, Borrill, Dawson, Brodbeck, Shapiro, & Haward, 2003; Naquin & Tynan, 2003; Edmonson, Roberto, & Watkins, 2003; van der Vegt, Gerben, & Janssen, 2003; Gibson & Vermeulen, 2003).

In LaFasto and Larson's (2001) more recent work on teams, they argue that there are six vital dimensions to team leadership: (a) Focusing on the Goal, (b) Ensuring a Collaborative Climate, (c) Building Confidence, (d) Demonstrating Sufficient Technical Know-How, (e) Setting Priorities, and (f) Managing Performance. While these factors are vital for the effective leadership of teams, Irving's (2004) recent examination into the relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness raises another variable that is equally important. Toward the end of better understanding this new research, the following section will explore a general overview of the research, the instruments used in the study, and the essential findings.

New Research

Recognizing a void in the servant leadership literature, Irving (2004) set out to examine the relationship between servant leadership—as measured by the OLA—and team effectiveness—as measured by an instrument developed by Larson and LaFasto (1989). Hypothesizing a positive correlation between these two constructs, the study included 202 participants who were drawn from 17 organizations across 3 organizational sectors.

New Research: Instruments

Two instruments were utilized in Irving's (2004) research—the OLA and the Team Effectiveness Questionnaire (TEQ). These instruments were selected due to Laub (1999) and Larson & LaFasto's (1989) close association with the primary constructs—servant leadership and team effectiveness accordingly. The OLA was originally developed through a Delphi investigation and then subsequently put through a broader field test for reliability. In the Delphi process 60 characteristics of servant leaders were identified and eventually clustered into six key areas. These areas serve as the six primary subscales in the OLA. Also included in the OLA is a comparative scale—Job Satisfaction—which serves as a seventh scale in the instrument. In Irving's study, the OLA had a combined Cronbach's Alpha of .981.

The TEQ—designed to assess the dimensions identified in Larson and LaFasto's (1989) work as being associated with effective teams—includes eight factors. These eight factors are: (a) Clear Elevating Goal, (b) Results-Driven Structure, (c) Competent Team Members, (d) Unified Commitment, (e) Collaborative Climate, (f) Standards of Excellence, (g) External Support/Recognition, and (h) Principled Leadership. Originally identified through a qualitative-grounded theory approach to research, Larson and LaFasto translated the eight factors associated with effective teams into the quantitative instrument utilized in Irving's (2004) study. In Irving's study, the TEQ had a Cronbach's Alpha of .857.

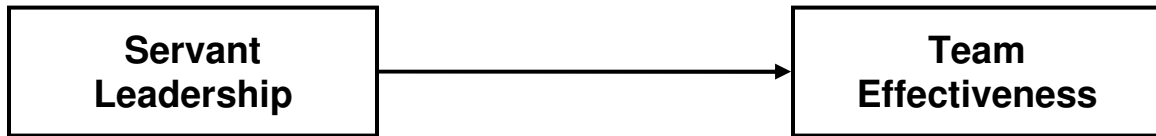
New Research: Findings

While several findings were reported in Irving's (2004) research, the most significant finding for consideration here was the correlation coefficient for the relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness as indicated by the OLA and the TEQ. According to Guilford (1956), the following guidelines may be utilized for interpreting the correlation coefficient: (a) $< .20$ = slight; almost negligible relationship, (b) $.20-.40$ = low correlation; definite but small relationship, (c) $.40-.70$ = moderate correlation; substantial relationship, (d) $.70-.90$ = high correlation; marked relationship, and (e) $> .90$ = very high correlation; very dependable relationship. In Irving's study the correlation coefficient was .592 (two-tailed Pearson r correlation) with a significance value of .000, indicating that the relationship between the two constructs was both substantial and highly significant.

A Working Model: The OLA and Team Effectiveness

The findings in Irving's (2004) study provide an empirical basis not only for affirming a positive relationship between servant leadership and the effectiveness of teams (see Figure 1), but also for utilizing the OLA as a strategic tool for increasing the effectiveness of teams in organizations.

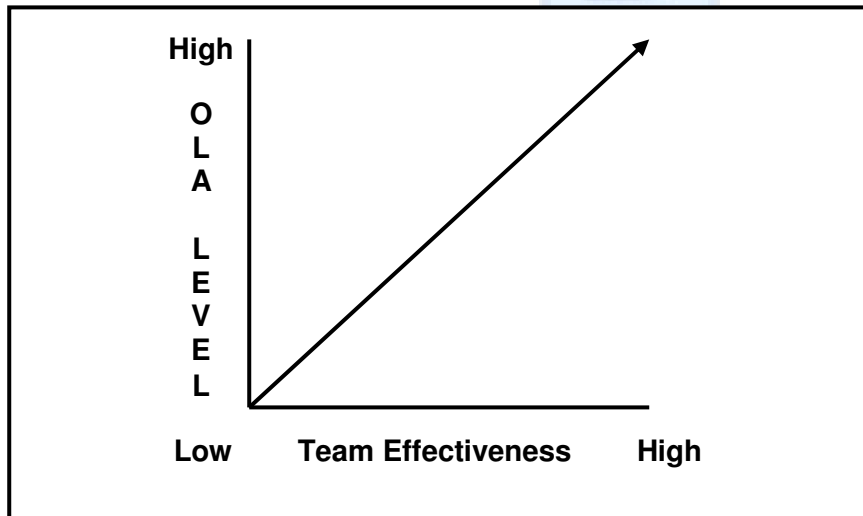
Figure 1



* Irving (2004)

Utilizing the OLA in this manner could take several forms. First, because higher levels of servant leadership have been correlated with team effectiveness, utilizing the OLA in light of the A-P-S Model provides a strategy for diagnosing the organizational health level of an organization. With an initial examination of an organization through the OLA, an organization may be identified as autocratic, paternalistic—Laub (2003) provides an interesting discussion on characteristics of both negative and positive forms of paternalistic leadership and followership—, or servant. In light of this diagnosis, organizational leaders may provide servant leadership training around the six dimensions of the OLA with the understanding that maturity along the A-P-S continuum will likely result in the increased effectiveness of teams. Figure 2 provides an illustration of this dynamic, which is consistent with the general scatterplot tendencies found in the Irving (2004) study.

Figure 2



Utilizing the OLA as a strategic tool for increasing the effectiveness of teams in organizations could take a second form as well. Beyond the basic A-P-S diagnostic capacity of the OLA, the OLA also allows for a determination of an organization's health in each of the six subscales independently. While the basic A-P-S assessment through the OLA is able to provide general guidance for training around the six dimensions of servant leadership measured in the OLA, utilizing the subscale diagnostic dimension of

the OLA allows for pinpointing specific areas of organizational health, as well as specific areas in which the organization may improve. These areas may be in (a) valuing people, (b) developing people, (c) building community, (d) displaying authenticity, (e) providing leadership, or (f) sharing leadership. Understanding these six dimensions in light of the associated descriptors provided in Table 2 will help an organization to focus on particular areas that need attention at an organizational level of analysis.

A third strategy is derived from additional findings in Irving's (2004) study. While each of the subscales are significantly correlated with the other instrument and subscales, when examining the interrelationships there are specific subscales that rise to the top of these correlations. In order to present these findings, Table 3 provides a matrix of intercorrelations. For economy of space, the following abbreviations will be used for the TEQ subscales in the matrix: (a) Clear Elevating Goal (CEG), (b) Results-Driven Structure (RDS), (c) Competent Team Members (CTM), (d) Unified Commitment (UC), (e) Collaborative Climate (CC), (f) Standards of Excellence (SOE), (g) External Support/Recognition (ES/R), and (h) Principled Leadership (PL). The Pearson *r* values are provided for the interrelationships between the OLA, the TEQ, and for each of the subscales of these two instruments.

Table 3
*Matrix of Intercorrelations***

	OLA Mean	Values People	Develops People	Builds Comm.	Displays Authent.	Provides Lead.	Shares Lead.
TEQ Mean	.592	.558	.566	.571	.513	.607	.511
CEG	.329	.290	.310	.279	.274	.406	.28
RDS	.283	.243	.268	.240	.240	.367	.23
CTM	.293	.315	.235	.298	.257	.245	.29
UC	.342	.344	.341	.341	.307	.321	.26
CC	.487	.483	.450	.508	.440	.428	.42
SOE	.340	.302	.370	.318	.283	.372	.26
ES/R	.436	.429	.428	.428	.375	.407	.38
PL	.554	.512	.528	.537	.480	.571	.48

** All Pearson *r* correlations in the matrix are positive and significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This table is adapted from one originally presented by Irving (2004).

There are two important points to note from this data. First, when looking at the interrelationship between the TEQ and each of the OLA subscales, each of the correlation coefficients are significant ($p = .000$), and all are substantially positive ranging from .511 to .607. Second, while each of these subscales are significant and substantial, two subscales rise to the top—Provides Leadership ($r = .607$) and Builds Community ($r = .571$). This particular pairing provides a “first-among-equals” type priority set for those interested in affecting the effectiveness of teams. As such, organizational leaders interested in improving the effectiveness of teams may wish to pay special attention to the study's findings in these two subscales, since organizational

leadership that Provides Leadership and Builds Community is likely to see a bottom-line improvement in the effectiveness of their teams.

Recommendations for Researchers and Practitioners

For those engaged in servant leadership research, Irving's (2004) research—and the implications of this research for teams—opens up many doors for further empirical studies. While some initial exploration into how this relationship performed across sectors was dealt with in Irving's study, more work is needed in assessing and confirming that the positive correlation between servant leadership and team effectiveness will be found in all major organizational sectors. Practically this means that it would be helpful to have independent studies utilizing a similar design conducted in multiple sectors. Furthermore, Irving's study does not address the qualitatively-oriented question of *why* this positive relationship exists, further opening the door for either qualitative or mix-method studies to investigate this important question.

For those engaged in the practice of leadership, and especially those engaged in the leading of teams, the implications of these recent findings must not go overlooked. As has been stated, "leaders must take away from this research the fact that servant-oriented leadership matters. The command and control styles of leadership which traditionally may have been associated with results in hierarchal organizations are giving way to more dispersed structures that enable and empower others to excel and perform" (Irving, 2004, p. 10). As this shift toward servant-oriented leadership takes place, an empowering environment emerges in which teams are able to flourish. Bottom-line, if leadership practitioners want the teams in their organization to be effective, then servant leadership is vital for increasing the effectiveness of teams. As a strategic answer for diagnosing the presence and absence of servant leadership, the OLA becomes a powerful tool in the hands of organizational leaders for developing the environmental conditions necessary for taking teams to the next level of effectiveness.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, I have (a) covered the literature surrounding servant leadership, the OLA, and team effectiveness, (b) summarized the relevant findings from Irving's (2004) study, (c) presented a model for understanding the relationship between the OLA and team effectiveness, along with a discussion of how the OLA may be utilized as a strategic tool for increasing the effectiveness of teams within organizations, and (d) offered recommendations for servant leadership researchers and team leadership practitioners. The OLA holds out great promise for assisting organizational leaders in the development of organizational environments which help to facilitate team effectiveness. For those eager to mature in team effectiveness, understanding the importance of servant leadership is difficult to overestimate, and the OLA provides a path for diagnosing and developing the servant leadership that will likely result in increased team effectiveness.

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