

TRANSFORMATIVE BUSINESS SERVANT LEADERSHIP: SERVING THE SOCIETY WITH COMMITMENT, INTEGRITY AND TEAMWORK

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Abstract

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The aim of this paper is to explore the key elements of transformative business servant leadership for improving the attributes of professional service providers for transformation under COVID-19. Collected through surveys on transformative servant leadership in business management from September 2021 to January 2022, quantitative results indicate that the independent variables, *Empowering others*, *Self-management*, and *Being moral and ethical* are found to have a significant influence on serving society. The independent variables for empowerment and self-management to serve the society identified are *Teamwork*, *Humility*, and *Vision*. The attributes of transformational servant leadership are seldom studied for improving the ways of serving society. With these findings, professional service organizations shall have an idea to re-design continual professional development (CPD) training for developing transformative business servant leaders.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Servant Leadership, Transformation

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1. INTRODUCTION

A sustainable development mindset with servant leadership has been mentioned in past studies for transformations. Under COVID-19, there is a need for new ways of providing professional services, for example, learning and teaching in educational and training services with transformative servant leadership attributes for transformations. It is time to explore attitudes, skills, and values needed for a professional transformative servant leader to re-design workflow with transformations and services with innovations for ensuring professional services are sustainable. Iscan (2021) mentioned that Industry 5.0 offers personalization instead of mass production that manufacturers can offer unique solutions to customers that can be only enabled by

“human touch”. Industry 4.0 cannot respond to this kind of manufacturing process because automation is the barrier to the “human touch”. In fact, this opens a potential market for new business creation under the new normal with productivity and personalised goods and services to satisfy the unique expectations of customers. For example, digital art business professional services may be a future area for the education sector. Other related areas may be using digital art and a metaverse way of thinking for enhancing public speaking skills with participants online and offline, for promoting programmes and projects via fun-to-learn and practical-to-build platforms with real-time workforce management skills, contact point service delivery, and an analytical quality management mindset.

An organization always focuses on getting success day by day. And employees are the major resources of it. Manpower is now no longer just taken as resources, but the capital or assets of the company. Therefore, it is only possible to gain success if it has its employees engaged in the company. Employee satisfaction has a significant impact on employee performance and keeping them in their position. Therefore, employee satisfaction is important to any organization, especially in the service industry, where the whole deliverable is the service performed by the employees.

Employee engagement is so important that the next logical question is to explore the drivers of employee engagement. It has been proposed that leadership has the greatest potential to influence followers' feelings of psychological safety by providing a supportive environment in which one feels safe to fully engage in a task. A study using a sample of 2,900 participants concluded that the most profitable work units of companies have people do what they do best, with people they like, and with a strong sense of ownership in a company. Findings from their research extended the theory about a manager's role in creating a supportive psychological climate and parallel early theories of engagement by suggesting that employees must have a supportive environment, job resources and support necessary to complete their work. On the other hand, research also found that many employees leave their jobs because they are unhappy with their employers.

Leaders are the individuals in the organization who set the tone and culture. An effective leader is able to influence his or her followers to reach the goals of the organization. Various leadership theories have evolved to define the characteristics, traits, and styles of various leaders and leadership styles. For the job market, effective leaders need to understand and apply the theory of transformational leadership brought up by Burns (1978). Transformational leadership emphasizes satisfying the basic needs, for example, physiological and safety needs, and trying to achieve a higher level of achievement, like self-esteem and self-actualization, inspiring followers to provide newer solutions and create a better workplace (Chandrashekhara, 2002; Marturano & Gosling, 2007). Bass (1985) uncovered four dimensions of transformational leadership. They are idealized influence, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation.

This study explores the key elements for transformative business servant leadership to serve society, especially for professional service organizations in redesigning a practical programme to serve for achieving their learning outcomes with higher-order critical thinking skills, value creation, and employability.

The research objectives are:

- to find out the key elements of developing transformative business servant leaders for sustainable development;
- to identify the independent variables for empowerment and self-management.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on sustainable development, transformative servant leadership, and the future of education. Section 3 reviews futures of education. Section 4 comments on

strategy in professional services. Section 5 provides the results of the study and Section 6 discusses the findings. Finally, Section 7 concludes the paper with implications for future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Sustainable development (SD)

In line with the United Nations (UN) Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) (DESD) (UNESCO, 2014), many research papers have been written on SD in the higher education sector. Different institutions have their own interpretations of sustainable development. In general, sustainable development is related to the economic, social, and environmental impacts of global growth, promoting responsible decision-making to allocate the resources necessary to meet the present and future needs of society. This is connected to how management defines and interprets sustainability when setting and implementing its short- and long-term strategic goals with total involvement of academic and administrative staff. Buying into the concept of sustainable development is the first and the most significant step in implementing sustainability-related actions in an institution, as the perception of staff on SD relates directly to their understanding of and exposure to sustainability ideals.

According to the definition of Brundtland (1987), sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Basic economic sustainability requires that the current activity of businesses be supported in the short term and that new products, services, processes, and people are supported in the long term. In the global initiatives of the UN DESD, the DESD's primary goal is for all people to develop the values, skills, attitudes, and knowledge commensurate with the principles and practices of sustainable development. This kind of proactive thinking can be integrated into all aspects of education and training for people in all nations at different ages to develop economic, social, environmental, and cultural awareness and to seek solutions for these problems. Hence, the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is relevant to all nations and all higher education institutions. Management in higher education institutions and professional service providers need to keep practicing the rationale of ESD beyond 2015 by integrating it into the institution's operational level in setting strategic goals and performance indicators as well as at school/programme levels in re-visiting the curriculum for the benefit of learners and the community.

2.2. From sustainable development to a sustainable development/sustainability mindset

In recent years, the higher education sector has started to address the issues of sustainable development in its operations and curriculum design. This has created a dramatic need for educators, especially curriculum designers, with a mindset of sustainability and social responsibility and those stakeholders who possess the skills to write sustainability-related reports to communicate

with stakeholders for accountability and transparency. This led to a need for further study of the elements of sustainable development and a sustainability mindset to align with the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to help develop learners to become future leaders who possess an SD mindset for fostering economic, social, and environmental impacts.

The concepts of sustainable development have been highly debated subjects and are of great importance for the future, especially in the higher education sector where students are being prepared to face the world's impending challenges and where they are expected to develop themselves personally and professionally in a sustainable manner. Szitar (2014) argues that community development is related to sustainability which needs to have stakeholder collaboration, linking up changes with sustainability, and adopting interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches in teaching. Pinho et al. (2015) also stated that university education not only enables professional growth but also promotes development on a personal level. Additionally, they highlighted that contextualisation is crucial in university education, including creating a variety of contexts for students to learn how to perceive the world, how to handle adverse situations, how to experience practical content, and how to create professional networks via extracurricular activities complementary to their studies.

In fact, Gedzune (2014), Gedzune and Gedzune (2012), and Pohl et al. (2010) also argue that teacher training and engagement through reflection, active research, and co-production of sustainability-related research are needed to understand the importance of a broader and interrelated perspective on issues surrounding sustainable development for the future. Kitagawa (2005) examined the role of universities in a knowledgeable society in light of the emergence of new research and learning systems, conditioned by forces of both globalisation and regionalisation with the impacts of these new relationships perceived in four principal dimensions: economy, human resources, governance, and community.

2.3. Transformative servant leadership

Transformational leaders help to realign the values and norms of their organization, and when necessary, to accommodate and promote both internal and external changes. It is stated that daily transformational leadership relates positively to employees' daily engagement. The summarized core of transformational leadership is about change transformation.

Servant leadership is a leadership philosophy that addresses the concerns of ethics, customer experience, and employee engagement while creating a unique organizational culture where both leaders and followers unite to reach organizational goals without positional or authoritative power.

Scholars have commented that both transformational leadership and servant leadership can find their roots in charismatic leadership. There is a substantial match between transformational leadership and servant leadership in terms of behavioral characteristics and consequences on both followers and organizations. These similarities

demonstrate that transformational leadership and servant leadership are not only totally inclusive of each other but also have similar impacts on organizations; therefore, they have the potential to be integrated into one concept termed "transformational servant leadership". This integration is significant for modern-day businesses and organizations because the complexity and ethical issues of modern-day businesses and organizations often challenge single-aspect-focused theories.

This study aims to find out the attributes of transformative business servant leadership by distributing online surveys to business leaders and business students for analysis. This study aims to provide insight into the existing body of transformative servant leadership research. There is a definite lack of knowledge on how transformative business servant leadership styles lead to sustainable development. Research has been carried out on individual leadership styles but not many studies have been done on combining leadership styles and how effective they are together. There is also very little research on transformational servant leadership with employee engagement. This study will explore this area.

The business world is complicated; new challenges are emerging, no matter whether it is the pandemic, the trade war, or the economic cycle. There are different leadership styles in the literature. A single leadership style may not be in the best interest of the organization. The combination of different leadership styles and characteristics may be a better approach. Transformational leadership and servant leadership are two popular leadership styles, and there are attempts by scholars to explore the key characteristics of transformative business servant leadership styles. However, it is far from a well-researched area, and there is no study on the combined leadership style in the service industry.

Based on the theoretical framework, some hypotheses emerge:

H1: People's commitment to their goals has a positive effect on their service to others/community.

H2: People with integrity are more likely to serve others/the community.

H3: People with an emphasis on teamwork are more likely to serve others/the community.

3. FUTURES OF EDUCATION: SELF MANAGEMENT, RESILIENCY, CRITICAL THINKING, AND CREATIVITY

The Education Forum on Futures of Education 2021 was organized by the UNESCO Hong Kong Association Global Peace Centre on the 10th of November 2021¹. This has brought key stakeholders from diverse backgrounds together with inspiring learning outcomes on knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values for the future under COVID-19 with uncertainties. The key players in fields including education, consultancy, information and technology had delivered speeches and joined the panel discussions during the forum. They presented the challenges we are facing nowadays and provided multifaceted insights on the potential means to tackle these challenges.

¹ <https://peacecentres.unesco.org.hk/futures-education-forum-2021/>

The focus of the forum was on how the future of education in Hong Kong and the Greater Bay Area could be reframed in response to the comprehensive findings of the survey conducted prior to the forum, for example, the issues of climate change, environmental crises, and an aging population. The top-ranked purposes of education in 2050 were scientific innovation, health and well-being, personal sustainability, and peace.

The main messages from panel discussions from participants related to inner peace and productivity were as follows:

- Current work-study mismatch and a rapidly changing society such that the concept of a life-long job is bygone.

- Students have to learn to learn, set their own goals, choose their own path and see their own success through self-directed learning.

- The top 5 jobs with increasing demand are data analysts and scientists, AI/ML learning specialists, big data specialists, digital marketing and strategy specialists, and process automation specialists.

- The true meaning of education is to educate the “hearts” and the “minds”.

- The four capabilities (“4 Cs”) are needed for the future of education: Complex problem-solving, Critical thinking, Communication, Creativity, and technology use and development.

- The shifting demand of skills for 2030 is higher cognitive skills, social and emotional skills, and technological skills, rather than physical or manual skills and lower cognitive skills.

- Integrated industry-benchmarking tools and data-driven course recommendations to curate strategic job-relevant learning programs that teach new-age skills.

- Upskill talent by offering custom learning paths that are linked to work and career advancement.

- Develop students, teachers, and parents with a mindset of personal sustainability and peace in learning and teaching, relationship building and caring with a pool of talents with multi-disciplinary knowledge and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) or STEAM (self-motivation, thinking, energizing, adventure, and making) mindset, better than knowing the techniques of climbing up the ladder.

A significant expectation gap between required skills and the ones currently provided, as well as the current curriculum versus the real world, has been identified. Respondents thought education on self-management, resiliency, critical thinking, and creativity could be the way out.

4. STRATEGY IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES: RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AND COMPETENCY

According to Itami (1987, as cited in Lowendahl, 1997), strategic management should be centered around the management of firm resources such that the firm's resource base is improved over time. It was also mentioned that the first strategic process concerns the product/market strategy, well defined by Ansoff (1967, as cited in Lowendahl, 1997) that an organization has to define its target markets to be served, “in terms of types of clients as well as geographical reach, and also what types of products or services are going to be delivered to these markets. For professional service firms, this decision is important, as it sets boundaries for the types of

expansions which are acceptable for professionals taking on new types of clients and offering different services from the traditional ones” (Lowendahl, 1997, p. 75).

Under COVID-19, organizations, especially professional service providers, need to relearn the ways of operating businesses for survival, excellence, and transformation from a perspective of resource management. There are four fundamental categories of resources mentioned by Lowendahl (1997) to be considered in strategic management. They are:

- financial assets;

- tangible resources, such as production equipment, plants, office buildings, etc.

- human resources, in terms of labor input;

- intangible or information-based resources, including competence, reputation, and brand equity.

This article is focused on exploring intangible resources and attributes of transformative business servant leadership with competency to perform professional services for transformations, for example, identifying a new target group of customers at the organizational level.

Managerial competencies include, but are certainly not limited to, the following:

- competence in terms of recruiting, motivating, and otherwise mobilizing other people's competencies;

- competence in terms of putting together teams in order to achieve creativity and other key synergies;

- competence in terms of creating the necessary “glue” to keep key knowledgeable individuals loyal to the firm (Lowendahl, 1997, p. 85).

Educators, trainers, curriculum designers, management of professional service organizations, and business leaders can be regarded as leaders for creating business and social impacts. Their strategic decision-making includes ways of utilizing intangible assets, for example, professional employees and networked partners who possess a certain level of self-management skills, resiliency, critical thinking, and creativity to provide feasible creative solutions to solve the challenges we are currently facing under COVID-19. Hence, the attributes of transformative business servant leaders and the factors leading to empowerment and self-management are worth being studied for the transfer of knowledge, re-building updated skills, attitudes, and values at an individual level via on-the-job and off-the-job training and at an organizational level for a better operation workflow.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Quantitative analysis

Based on reviewing relevant literature on sustainable development, transformative servant leadership, and the future of education, a survey about transformative servant leadership in business management was conducted online from September 2021 to January 2022. Subjects include people working in business management and students studying business management. Respondents to the survey are from Hong Kong and the Greater Bay Area in China. A total of 310 responses were collected. There are 131 males and 179 females. The majority of respondents are below the age of 40 years, of which 115 are below 25 years and 153 are between

26 years and 40 years. Seventy-three (73) respondents are working in frontline business management, 68 are at the middle level, 26 are at the higher level, 28 are entrepreneurs in industries related to business management while 96 are students in business management. The number of collected questionnaires is sufficient for a preliminary understanding of the key elements for transformative business servant leaders to serve the society. The survey participants are recommended by worldwide non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to develop young leaders to serve the society.

The online questionnaire consists of 6 constructs measuring the values of Commitment, Humility, Resilience, Integrity, Service, and Teamwork (CHRIST) and items measuring the characters of people in business management and their visions.

To explore the relationship between the personal attributes of business management people and their commitment to serving society, a regression analysis is conducted. Twelve (12) items about characters are selected and put in the regression model as the independent variables while an item measuring serving society is the dependent variable. Results indicate that the regression model is statistically significant at 0.01 level (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.215$, $F(12, 277) = 7.59$, $p < 0.001$). Among the independent variables, *Empowering others* ($t = 2.67$, $p < 0.01$), *Self-management* ($t = -3.08$, $p < 0.01$), and *Being moral and ethical* ($t = 2.03$, $p < 0.05$) are found to have a significant influence on serving society.

5.2. Selected correlation

Correlation analysis is conducted to measure the linear relationship between different variables. Pairs of variables with moderate to high correlation (Pearson correlation coefficients above 0.5) are selected and reported here:

- There is a positive correlation between *Life-long learning* and *Perseverance* ($r(292) = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$).
- There is a positive correlation between *Life-long learning* and *Open-mindedness* ($r(292) = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$).
- There is a positive correlation between *Perseverance* and *Humility* ($r(298) = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$).
- There is a positive correlation between *Perseverance* and *Flexibility* ($r(298) = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$).
- There is a positive correlation between *Emotionally stable* and *Communication skills* ($r(289) = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$).
- There is a positive correlation between *Teamwork* and *Self-management* ($r(298) = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$).
- There is a positive correlation between *Being humble* and *Serving others* ($r(298) = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$).
- There is a positive correlation between *People-oriented* and *Innovative* ($r(298) = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$).
- There is a positive correlation between *Visionary* and *Teamwork* ($r(298) = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 1a. Regression analysis on empowerment (HK business people — Structural covariance)

<i>Response variables</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>C.R.</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>Label</i>
<i>Service</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	0.610	0.087	7.017	***	b1_1
<i>Service</i> ← <i>Teamwork</i>	0.263	0.063	4.189	***	b2_1
<i>Q6</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	1.000				
<i>Q5</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	1.189	0.096	12.391	***	a1_1
<i>Q4</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	1.130	0.096	11.750	***	a2_1
<i>Q3</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	1.209	0.100	12.125	***	a3_1
<i>Q2</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	1.159	0.087	13.266	***	a4_1
<i>Q1</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	0.996	0.085	11.684	***	a5_1
<i>Q29</i> ← <i>Service</i>	1.000				
<i>Q28</i> ← <i>Service</i>	1.140	0.101	11.256	***	a6_1
<i>Q27</i> ← <i>Service</i>	1.128	0.094	12.000	***	a7_1
<i>Q26</i> ← <i>Service</i>	1.182	0.094	12.528	***	a8_1
<i>Q25</i> ← <i>Service</i>	0.970	0.091	10.688	***	a9_1
<i>Q35</i> ← <i>Teamwork</i>	0.885	0.065	13.720	***	a10_1
<i>Q34</i> ← <i>Teamwork</i>	1.000				
<i>Q32</i> ← <i>Teamwork</i>	0.908	0.052	17.472	***	a11_1
<i>Q31</i> ← <i>Teamwork</i>	0.902	0.059	15.176	***	a12_1

Table 1b. Regression analysis on empowerment (HK social workers — Unconstrained)

<i>Response variables</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>C.R.</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>Label</i>
<i>Service</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	0.258	0.079	3.271	0.001	b1_2
<i>Service</i> ← <i>Teamwork</i>	0.196	0.067	2.900	0.004	b2_2
<i>Q6</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	1.000				
<i>Q5</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	0.849	0.129	6.587	***	a1_2
<i>Q4</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	1.183	0.153	7.751	***	a2_2
<i>Q3</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	1.098	0.141	7.772	***	a3_2
<i>Q2</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	0.937	0.112	8.388	***	a4_2
<i>Q1</i> ← <i>Commitment</i>	0.825	0.117	7.057	***	a5_2
<i>Q29</i> ← <i>Service</i>	1.000				
<i>Q28</i> ← <i>Service</i>	1.383	0.294	4.702	***	a6_2
<i>Q27</i> ← <i>Service</i>	1.659	0.310	5.343	***	a7_2
<i>Q26</i> ← <i>Service</i>	2.040	0.370	5.519	***	a8_2
<i>Q25</i> ← <i>Service</i>	1.295	0.275	4.707	***	a9_2
<i>Q35</i> ← <i>Teamwork</i>	0.666	0.102	6.556	***	a10_2
<i>Q34</i> ← <i>Teamwork</i>	1.000				
<i>Q32</i> ← <i>Teamwork</i>	0.956	0.076	12.529	***	a11_2
<i>Q31</i> ← <i>Teamwork</i>	1.031	0.092	11.215	***	a12_2

Table 1c. Regression analysis on empowerment (Standardized regression weights)

HK business people			Estimate	HK social workers			Estimate
Service	←	Commitment	0.653	Service	←	Commitment	0.418
Service	←	Teamwork	0.329	Service	←	Teamwork	0.328
Q6	←	Commitment	0.631	Q6	←	Commitment	0.685
Q5	←	Commitment	0.705	Q5	←	Commitment	0.594
Q4	←	Commitment	0.662	Q4	←	Commitment	0.713
Q3	←	Commitment	0.661	Q3	←	Commitment	0.715
Q2	←	Commitment	0.731	Q2	←	Commitment	0.784
Q1	←	Commitment	0.638	Q1	←	Commitment	0.641
Q29	←	Service	0.590	Q29	←	Service	0.445
Q28	←	Service	0.633	Q28	←	Service	0.572
Q27	←	Service	0.636	Q27	←	Service	0.779
Q26	←	Service	0.686	Q26	←	Service	0.906
Q25	←	Service	0.582	Q25	←	Service	0.573
Q35	←	Teamwork	0.649	Q35	←	Teamwork	0.510
Q34	←	Teamwork	0.725	Q34	←	Teamwork	0.902
Q32	←	Teamwork	0.770	Q32	←	Teamwork	0.826
Q31	←	Teamwork	0.689	Q31	←	Teamwork	0.764

Hence, the continual professional development (CPD) framework of professional service organizations may consider integrating commitment, integrity, and teamwork into their training activities to enhance the competency of talents.

6. DISCUSSION

In order to develop transformative business servant leaders with a mindset of serving society with integrity, trust, reliability, and communication skills with empowerment and self-management, it is recommended to have a CPD workshop offered by professional service organizations integrating organizational empowerment to serve society in the four levels of futures of education model with:

Level 1: Values of commitment with caring people and community — accommodation, compassion, active listening.

Level 2: Skills of applying integrity with scenario-based planning for expected consequences, responsiveness to change, and positive thinking for exploring opportunities.

Level 3: Projects with teamwork to serve others and the community, local/global exposure, actions with a team of diversity, and testing solutions.

Level 4: Implementing these key elements for a transformative business servant leadership model for sustainable development.

The design of the workshop is recommended to promote the application of SDGs and academic theories of servant leadership, design thinking, and change management with research excellence and vocational skills in selected industries. Renowned overseas and local scholars and experts in professional

service design, operations, corporate social responsibility audit, and SDG implementation projects with entrepreneurial experiences in service/product design would be invited to serve as speakers and workshop conveners to present their current research, demonstrate their good practices in nurturing transformative business servant leaders with SDG related product, service and curriculum design without boundary for a better world.

7. CONCLUSION

The idea of the survey is to identify the key elements for transformative business servant leaders to serve society and the fundamental indispensables related to empowerment and self-empowerment. This will also help to develop more qualitative and quantitative research on analyzing the impacts of developing transformative business servant leaders and SD-related actions in professional service organizations for improving the competency level of professionals with higher-order skills, for example, empowerment and self-management.

Through quantitative analysis of a collected survey on transformative business servant leadership and literature on the future of education and future skills 2030 from websites of OECD, McKinsey & Company, Pearson, and UNESCO, it is recommended to design a transformative business servant leadership curriculum with commitment, integrity, and teamwork to serve the society and transform traditional perspectives of operating business focusing on profit to serving with responsible profit for sustainable development.

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