

Servant leadership in the South African public sector-Challenges and possibilities in a VUCA world: A Systematic review

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In an era when corporate scandals perpetrated by public sector organizational leaders have become increasingly rife, the 21st century has witnessed a sudden and growing interest in more moral and ethical leadership approaches. Increased attention has been directed at, and value placed on an approach termed ‘servant leadership-a form of leadership that captures the dimensions of personal integrity and social responsibility. Amidst the Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity, (VUCA), Servant leadership offers a radically different way of leading that nurtures healthy organizational relationships. Challenges precipitated by VUCA require that public service servant leadership practitioners be able to balance stakeholder demands for accountability. The study aims to critically reflect on the potentialities for the application of servant leadership to leadership in SA public sector organisations. This research uses a three-pronged theoretical approach: (Greenfield’s Theory of Servant Leadership (1970); Blau’s (1964) Social Exchange Theory and Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory).

A qualitative research methodology was employed; appropriate ethical considerations for the collection, analysis and reporting of secondary data were followed. The data were subjected to thematic analysis. The research concluded that for public service leadership to be prepared to lead effectively, there is need for the cultivation of a Servant leadership mindset.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

We are in an era when corporate scandals perpetrated by leaders in organizations have become increasingly rife, and organizational leaders are striving to act more responsibly to rebuild trust with followers (Alzaabi & Khaimah, 2023). As a result, there is a sudden and growing interest in more moral and ethical styles of leadership (Makau, 2021; Lemoine, Hartnell, & Leroy, 2019). The 21st century has seen a significant surge of interest in morally based leadership approaches such as servant leadership—a form of leadership that captures the dimensions of personal integrity and social responsibility, which are now rarely seen in today's leader. A leader's moral standing and stature are now viewed by many as not only necessary for the good of society but also essential for sustainable organizational success (Prinsloo & de Klerk, 2020).

In a world marked by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity, (VUCA), Servant Leadership offers a radically different way of leadership that nurtures healthy organizational relationships, while staying on the edge of dynamic change (2023. Strategic Government Resources (SGR) 2023.12 Principles of Servant leadership Find this). In defining servant leadership, many scholars cite and build from Greenleaf's (1970) definition of servant leadership, which states that: "The great leader is seen as servant first...". In essence, Greenleaf's conception and subsequent definitions align in their suggestion that servant leadership's distinctive focus is on serving multiple stakeholders (Lemoine, Hartnell & Leroy, 2019). For the purposes of this research, the authors have decided to adopt Spears' (2002) definition of Servant Leadership, being "a model that identifies serving others – including employees, customers, and community – as the number-one priority" in leadership ; as well as that which states that Servant Leadership is "a group-oriented approach to leadership that emphasizes serving others" (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011). This leadership is considered a natural model in the public sector, this being mainly due to the reason that public organization leaders are thought to have stronger intentions to serve in comparison to leaders who lead private organisations (Garg & Jain, 2018), whose main motive is profit making.

The public sector, as described by the South African Reserve Bank (2011)

"...consists of institutional units that are legal entities with political responsibilities established through the political process mainly to produce non-market goods and services for individual and public consumption, and to redistribute income and wealth. These institutional units invest in assets and fund activities by levying taxes and issuing financial instruments."

The public sector plays a critical role in the economy as it is empowered to regulate the nation's life, security and order, the economy, as well as the equitable allocation of services and resources. Moreover, this sector also provides public goods and services, which are either too significant or

uneconomical for the private sector to commit itself to providing such. The Public sector plays an indispensable role in the delivery of public services that are key to the functioning of a state economy, and when the delivery of such services is constrained or becomes ineffective, it affects the quality of life of the people and nation's development process (Mbandlwa, 2020).

This study aims to critically reflect the potentialities for the application of servant leadership to leadership in public sector organisations in the 21st century VUCA environment, where public service practitioners are expected to be able to balance stakeholder demands for accountability in their decision-making and actions. Research has proven that moral forms of leadership have an influence on important outcomes such as leader effectiveness and follower attitudes and behaviors (Lemoine, Hartnell & Leroy, 2019; Zhang, Zhou & Mao, 2018). Servant leadership (SL) as a moral form of leadership is related with particular outcomes (Bilal, Siddiquei, Asadullah, Awan & Asmi, 2020).

VUCA Environment

In the last 30 years that have been termed a VUCA period (an acronym for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous); considerable changes have come about; incorporating challenges such as rapid technological advancements, unpredictable events such as pandemics, climate change and natural disasters, geo-political tensions and economic melt-downs. Far-flung events such as the Russia-Ukraine war, the conflict between Israel and Palestine to name a few, have had serious effects on the livelihoods of the general populace of South Africa (through the rise in fuel prices, fertilizers, agricultural inputs, chemicals, wheat, corn and many more). As the government tries to attend to such unimagined emergencies, funds that were meant for public service provision may be diverted to such eventualities which may need more urgent attention. With these events, the expectations and behaviors of members of the public have also changed. These contexts demand more accountability from public sector leadership; they have become more diverse and dynamic; increasingly informed and connected, thus, creating new challenges for the leadership of the public sector. The result of these shifts, as well as the evolution of other new external challenges have created a need for new leaders and new leadership approaches.

1.2. Problem Statement

We are in an era where ethics scandals perpetrated by leaders in public sector organizations seem to be the norm. Poor service delivery by leadership has hindered much needed development in the lives of ordinary people as well as in terms of their economic empowerment, leading to frequent incidents of protest action against corrupt, uncaring and self-serving leaders of the public service (Mbandlwa, Dorasamy, & Fagbadeo, 2020).

Contributors to poor service delivery in South Africa are many, among which are lack of resources, inadequate infrastructure, poorly trained personnel, political infighting, corruption, and self-serving leadership. Amongst these, corruption has played a major role in the genesis and perpetuation of poor service delivery and has come to be recognized as one of the South African government's greatest challenges in the public sector. An example of this is whereby high-ranking officials in the South African government have been fingered in the misappropriation of COVID-19 relief funds (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2020), and when evidence of irregularities in the awarding of tenders related to COVID-19 response efforts have been unearthed in the Department of Health (McCain, 2021). The Public Sector Commission (PSC) (2011) has stated that the five most common manifestations of corruption, which are steadily increasing in the SA public sector, are fraud and bribery, mismanagement of government funds, abuse of government resources, identity document fraud and procurement irregularities; turning the possibility of "a better life for all" South Africans into the preserve of the wealthy and privileged few, frustrating the poor to the extent that it drives them to indignant behaviour, expressed in acts of violence (Naidoo 2012) and protests which often result in deaths of these protesters at the hands of the police and the destruction of public property.

As corruption goes unchecked, this presents a vicious cycle that keeps the ordinary people in a state of perpetual poverty and the experience of a sense of dehumanization. Corruption hampers the state from fulfilling its obligations to respect and protect the human rights of its citizens. On a wider scale, it sets doubt as to whether the nation can fulfil its international objectives under the relevant SDGs of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, to provide citizens their right to basic needs.

There is a widespread belief that irresponsible leaders often go unpunished. Such public perceptions undermine trust in the public sector leadership (Harb, Hachem & Hamdan ,2020) and reduce the belief that corrupt behavior will ever be deterred - to the extent that even the public sector's best plans no longer excite the people. Confidence in the public sector leadership has waned; it has become grossly degraded, and urgent intervention is seriously required. Such failures have driven the agenda for better governance and accountability in the public sector. In fact, Governments and the civil society have become increasingly interested in the idea that citizens can greatly contribute to the improved quality of service delivery by holding policy makers and providers of services accountable (Ringold, Holla, Koziol & Srinivasan, 2012). For them to be able to do this, these citizens need to be equipped with information about their rights, the standards of service delivery that they should expect from service providers as well as the actual performance.

In all the recitation of gross unethical behavior in the public service of South Africa cited above, a lack of good leadership is apparent, hence the perceived poor service delivery in South Africa. Good leadership certainly is the required catalyst for good governance and efficient and effective service delivery (Mbandlwa, 2020). Servant leadership has come to be considered a natural model in the public sector, mainly due to the reason that public organization leaders are thought to have stronger

intentions to serve the public (Garg & Jain, 2018), and in the wake of modern-day public scandals, researchers are seeking to shift their attention from self-serving leadership styles to more relational ones. For the purposes of this particular research, the following observation by Mangaliso (2001) is of importance, that “much of management theory is based on the writings of 20th century Western scholars whose disciplinary orientations are heavily grounded in economics and classical sociology ... studies that have not reflected indigenous dimensions and contexts that are critically important to African leadership (Blunt & Jones, 1997). In African leadership, in particular Africa south of the Sahara, some core values of African leaders have been identified, namely: respect for the dignity of others, group solidarity, teamwork, service to others, the spirit of harmony and interdependence (that is, ‘each one of us needs all of us’) (Mbigi, 2002). The ‘interdependence’ dimension is what has come to be known as the spirit of ‘ubuntu’ (Mangaliso, 2001; Mbigi, 1997). Ubuntu is the basic philosophy that governs African existence as well as social relations; it denotes a family atmosphere. . . philosophical affinity and kinship among and between indigenous people of Africa (Karsten & Illa, 2004); it is deeply anchored in history and includes present and future obligations to the social entity (Wanasika et al, 2011). A paradox arises: in Africa, the default setting of leadership is ubuntu with its stated values, and yet governance systems (at the workplace) that are now in place (post colonialism) are Eurocentric (Mangaliso, 2001, Heleta, 2016). How then does the same leader, born and raised surrounded by ubuntu values, fare in the face of Eurocentric servant leadership in the public sector workplace, which is now predicated in a VUCA environment, and which demands a new way of thinking?

1.3. Research objective

The objective of this research is to establish *how* servant leadership can be practiced in order to enhance the South African public sector organizational performance in a VUCA environment

1.3.1.1. Philosophy underpinning the study

The study is premised on three theories, namely, the Servant Leadership Theory (SLT), supported by the Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) as well as the Social Learning Theory (SoLT) (Bandura, 1977) since the authors are convinced that these are highly relative to public service leadership.

Greenfield's Servant leadership Theory (1970)

First proposed by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970, this is a theoretical framework that advocates a leader's primary motivation and role as service to others. Spears (1996) re-defined servant-leadership to mean: “...A new kind of leadership model - a model which puts serving others as the number one priority; emphasizes increased service to others; a holistic approach to work; promoting a sense of

community; and the sharing of power in decision-making”. Kenton (2023) mentions that Servant leadership is a leadership style and philosophy whereby an individual interacts with others-either in a management or fellow employee capacity-to achieve authority rather than power. Thus, the authority figure in servant leadership environments is marked by several qualities.

Blau's (1964) Social Exchange theory states that: “...subordinates perceive a high-quality social exchange relationship with ethical leadership”; this social exchange would incline them to produce feelings of personal gratitude, obligation, and trust which motivate subordinates to pay back with positive attitudes and beneficial working behaviors (Bhasin, 2020). This theory has been applied within moral forms of leadership to suggest that moral leaders engender positive relationships with followers who reciprocate by engaging in positive behaviors (that may be directed toward the leader, colleagues, the work unit, or customers) that their leader values.

Bandura's (1977) Social learning theory postulates that followers tend to observe their moral leaders' behaviors because such leaders are attractive and credible role models. Followers emulate these positive behaviors because they are valued, rewarded, and supported in the workplace (van Knippenberg & van Kleef, 2016). Amongst the moral forms of leadership literature, these three theories draw similar conclusions about leaders' effects on followers. Moral forms of leadership such as servant leadership are motivational, they draw followers to desire to identify with the supervisor by mimicking their behaviors and modelling their attitudes and values in similar manner to their role model and leader. They engage in positive behaviors that generate positive outcomes.

Integrating these three theories introduces a robust framework for servant leadership as they uphold empathy, ethical behavior, employee development, collaboration, and trust – all of which can lead to more effective and compassionate leadership practices in any organization.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Servant Leadership

“...The great leader is seen as servant first...” – Robert K. Greenleaf (1970)

This short sentence captures the essence of the servant-leadership theory. According to Greenfield, (1970) and Kenton, James and Schmitt, (2023), the servant leader approaches situations and organizations from the perspective of a servant first, looking to lend their presence to answer the needs of the organization and others. Servant leaders seek to address stakeholder wants and requirements as their priority, with leadership to be pursued secondarily, they focus on how to best engage and empower multiple stakeholders and facilitate for them to work with their full potential to create a lasting impact on the local community and the society (Awasti & Walumbwa, 2023).

It is noteworthy that ethical, authentic and servant leadership are commonly grouped together as somewhat homogeneous moral approaches to leadership (Dinh, Lord, Gardner, Meuser, Liden, & Hu, 2014), but their individual definitions reveal their distinct differences. They tend to be more inclined towards enhancing the internal organizational performance as well as to obtaining good relations between the leader and the followers. Ethical leadership focuses on compliance with normative standards (Hassan et al, 2014), authentic leadership focuses on self-awareness and self-concordance, and servant leadership focuses on benefiting multiple stakeholders (Lemoine, Hartnell & Leroy, 2019). While each of these leadership styles is distinct and appropriate for specific situations, they fall short of taking an integrated approach to the important and key values of ethical and service orientation, which are key in the public sector; they omit that critical element of community service orientation. This research therefore focuses on the attributes of servant leadership in its dimension of service to the community or the public. Figure 1 below depicts the conceptual overlap among the 3 types of moral leadership, namely ethical, authentic, and servant leadership.

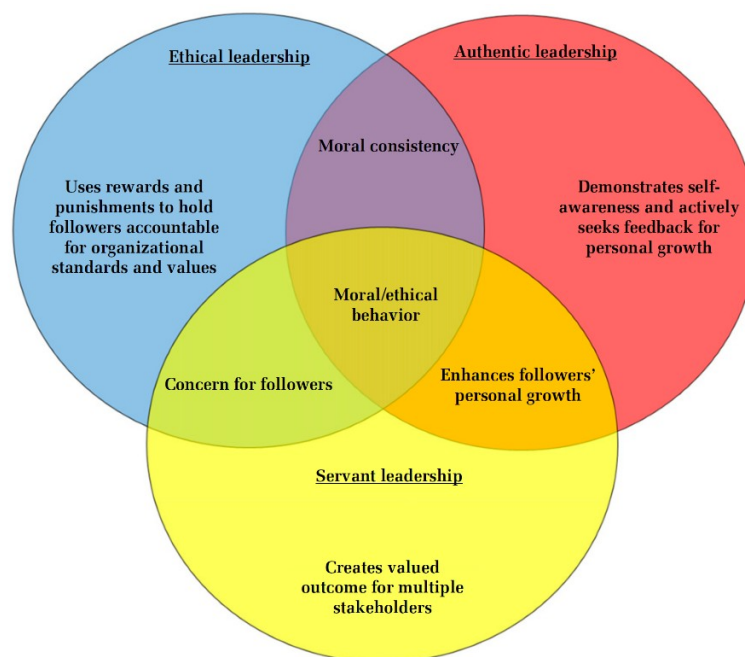


Figure1: Types of moral leadership and their unique approaches. (Lemoine et al, 2016)

The distinctive dimension of Servant leadership is in creating value for the subordinates, the community as well as for those outside of the organization. Servant leadership places a greater emphasis on people rather than on anything else, and it is on this distinction that it stands apart from other approaches. This type of leadership is pertinent to the public sector organisations because it mainly prioritizes the ethical and service orientation of administrators in creating public value for the community (Awasti & Walumbwa, 2023). This research focuses on public sector Servant leadership

that focuses on benefitting the members of the public that are served by the public sector service providers (public servants). In this relationship, the public sector is held accountable to members of the public as their stakeholders; Public servants are not driven by a financial bottom line-but they are driven by impact; whereby instead of asking how they can generate the biggest profits, they ask themselves, “How can we do the most good?” (Controller and Auditor-General, 2019). The impact of their accountability is of utmost importance.

Importance of Public sector accountability

Accountability is one of the key principles of modern public governance. The concept of public accountability means public officials who are custodians of the state resources (financial, human, information and physical) are answerable and responsible for their decisions, and actions within the public domain, and this is especially linked to the way they manage these resources (Rulashe & Ijeoma, 2022; McGrath & Whitty, 2018)

The most explicit reference to accountability in public institutions is grounded in the UN’s SDG 16, which commits UN member states to ‘promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, **accountable** and inclusive institutions at all levels’ (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). This means that, government accountability as service providers (or regulators of service provision) is a crucial element, of so great importance that, in a UN survey conducted prior to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, attendant participants demanded ‘an honest and responsive government’ as the fourth most important priority after education, health care and employment (International IDEA Policy Brief, 2016). Such a demand clearly reflects the general people’s aspirational expectations for the world they want through the SDGs. The White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (Batho Pele) as well as Section 195 of the Constitution (1996) advocate for an accountable public administration and declare that accountability and transparency to be the grounding pillars of the public service and service delivery.

Over the years, the Auditor-General’s (AG’s) reports on Local Government Audit outcomes reflect a general undesirable performance of public service entities in South Africa, resulting in poor service delivery. Causative factors leading to such poor service delivery can be attributed to the lack of willpower of the elected politicians, the institutional design, shortcomings from the management and inadequate leadership as well as corruption (Mofolo, Mkuyana & Skade, 2014). South Africa subscribes to democratic governance, which means that the government carries out its obligations in a competent, reliable, and honest way that makes people believe they have a stake in government and governance (Mavee, 2022). The need for public sector accountability arises because there needs to be a relationship of trust between the service providers and members of the public to judge its trustworthiness in the way it uses public money and resources (Controller & Auditor-General, 2019).

The fact that the public sector levies tax on members of the public to fund their operations indeed calls for accountability, and where there is no public accountability, this leads to the government not being able to fulfil its mandate of service delivery as clear opportunities for misconduct and maladministration set in (Rulashe & Ijeoma, 2022). Globally, the public has increased its demands for transparency and greater accountability for the resources spent as well as for better services. The public needs to know what it is getting for the taxes and rates that are levied, they need to know how well or otherwise that is being spent, and this forms the basis of public accountability.

Public Trust

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013) observes that:

... trust is essential for social cohesion and well-being as it affects governments' ability to govern and enables them to act without having to resort to coercion. There should be a healthy working relationship as well as clear lines of communication between the government and the citizens to ensure accountability, openness and transparency.

A decline in trust can lead to lower rates of compliance with the set rules and regulations, resulting in protest actions against perceived lack of service delivery as well as systemic corruption in public service institutions (Breakfast, Bradshaw & Nomarwayi, 2019). The reputation of the public sector gets damaged when people's trust and respect in government is undermined. In a 2021 Budget speech by the then South African Finance Minister, it was pointed out that 59% of the country's 278 municipalities were in serious financial trouble, 14% could not provide basic services, 37% made budgets they could not pay back, while 57 of these municipalities could not even account for their spending in 2020 (Gossel & Koelble, 2021), reflecting the organizational deficit of financial leadership accountability.

On the other hand, members of the public's satisfaction with public services improves trust in government, which is critical for institutionalizing a nation's democratic systems. As stated by Transparency International New Zealand (2018), as well as the South African Department of Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation (DPME-2021) "trust and confidence of members of the public can be built and maintained by the public sector demonstrating qualities of competence, reliability, and honesty.

2.2 A conceptual overview of public accountability and service delivery

Below (Figure 2) is an accountability model of functions and relationships of various actors working towards sustainable public accountability (World Bank, 2003).

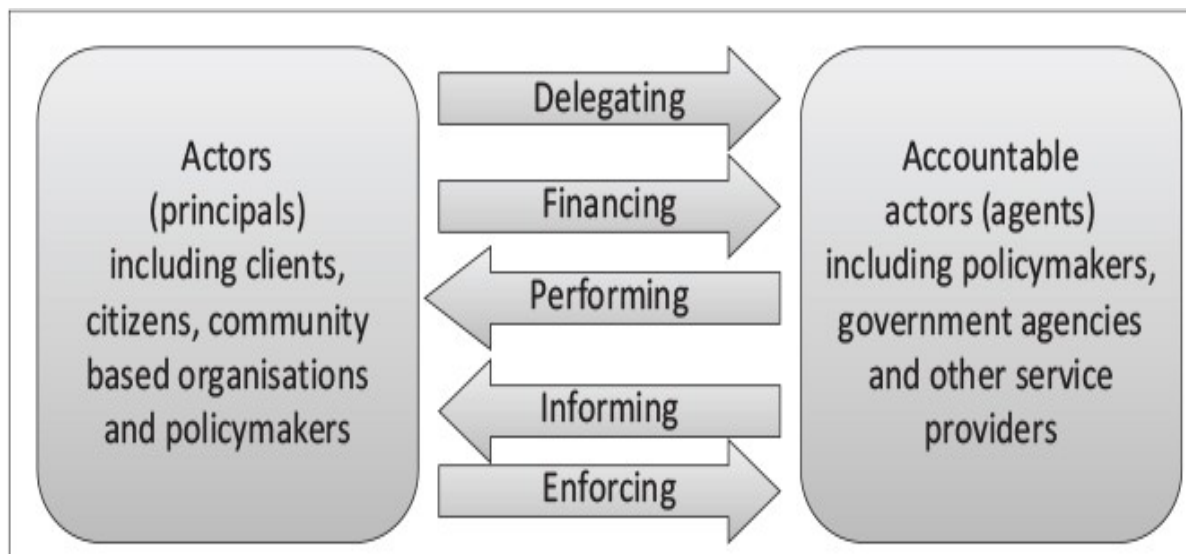


Figure 2: Accountability model of functions and relationships.

Source: World Bank, (2003).

To conceptualize the relationship between public accountability and service delivery, the researchers adopted the diagram above to show how members of the public and other stakeholders delegate power and authority to government and politicians to manage public resources. The members of public (Actors) finance the operations of government (Accountable actors) and subsequently need to hold them answerable for their actions and decisions (Rulashe & Ijeoma, 2022), meaning that the government should always execute its duties in a transparent and accountable way, and the public needs to be informed of the government's functions and decisions. The section below will look at the servant leader as the one leading the service providers.

2.2.1 Servant leader

A servant leader's role is to be the steward of a group's resources and to teach other leaders to serve others while still achieving the goals set forth by the business ref. Leaders are known to lead from the front, to effervesce the power of their influence upon their subordinates. Likewise, Servant leaders can influence their subordinates by serving and helping them to develop their sense of service and behavior (Liden et al., 2008; Bauer et al., 2019); by being role models and providing necessary guidance and training. Through these and many others, servant leaders can transmit their characteristics of "service" to their employees and help them grow into service-oriented employees (Greenleaf, 1970; Lemoine et al., 2019), which is much needed in today's public sector, such as Municipalities, Health departments, Education, Social Development, Home Affairs to name but a few.

2.2.2 Outcomes of servant leadership

The aspect of servant leadership that is pertinent to this research is the one whereby the servant leader's concern extends beyond the traditional focus on employees or the organization to include the wellbeing of external stakeholders such as customers and communities. One peculiar aspect of servant leadership is that it is attentive to and creates valued outcomes for multiple stakeholders, both internal and external to the organization (Lee et al, 2019). This subset of Servant leadership is associated with particular outcomes, such as a serving culture and service climate, focused on broadly helping others (Hunter, Neubert, Perry, Witt, Penney & Weinberger, 2013; Liden et al., 2014b; Ling, Lin & Wu, 2016; Neubert, Hunter, & Tolentino, 2016). It also lays out a variety of service-related outcomes, including customer-first orientation, customer-focused citizenship, and customer value cocreation, which involve members of the organization transcending simple "customer service" and going above and beyond in their efforts to help customers (Chen, Zhu, & Zhou, 2015; Hsiao, Lee, & Chen, 2015; Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko & Roberts, 2009). In this regard, customer service behaviors and quality become unique outcomes to servant leadership (Liden et al., 2014b).

This research argues that, if leaders of public service institutions can subscribe to the tenets of servant leadership, the above positive behaviours will be transmitted and manifested in the employees under them, and service delivery will be executed perfectly. Servant leadership from a theoretical perspective is ideal. However, there is a huge disconnect between this ideal theoretical perspective and its implementation, and as mentioned by Echoes HQ, (2022) and by Raffoni, (2015), that a disconnect between planning and execution always happens when separate groups are responsible for defining what must be done and for getting it done, as explained henceforth.

The public sector gets its legitimacy from the nation's ruling political party. The type of leadership that it is premised on, and the power of their influence, will effervesce upon their subordinates (Bauer et al., 2019; Somoye, 2016), as the supporting theories to this research suggest (Social Exchange Theory, Blau, 1964 & Social Learning Theory, Bandura, 1977). Budgets to execute public service plans and projects may be allocated, but do the people responsible for implementation subscribe to the tenets of servant leadership? In fact, does servant leadership work in an African context? It may be possible that cultural differences exist in the occurrence and interpretation of the known servant leadership behaviors. In the following section, we seek to expose whether servant leadership is only a North American concept that is of limited utility in other parts of the world, and whether the behaviors inherent to the practice of servant leadership are endorsed as effective in other cultural settings, apart from the American culture (Troy 2008). In fact, a recent study in South African found that Africans view servant leadership differently when compared to other cultures (McCallaghan, Jackson & Heyns, 2019)

In scholarly literature, while Servant leadership originated in the Western context, (Ertel, 2017), the principles of servant leadership are universal and exist in various cultural, philosophical, and religious traditions around the world (for example, in Asia, there is Confucianism and Taoism, and in the

Middle Eastern Context, there is the Islamic Leadership- all of which embody the tenets of servant leadership).

In the African worldview, the same concept exists, known as Ubuntu, which is more explicitly elaborated in the Batho Pele principles, as well as in the African Traditional Leadership, which often involves communal decision-making and a focus on the welfare of the community, reflecting servant leadership principles (Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2003). This research will only focus on Ubuntu values (Batho Pele).

2.2.3 Batho Pele Principles as an Aid to Servant Leadership in South Africa

The Constitution of South Africa and various public policies of government are underpinned by people-centered values and principles, hence the term Batho Pele (People First). Batho Pele sets out how members of the public sector should relate to one another and to the public that they serve (Job Mokgoro Consulting, 2003). Batho Pele was established to encourage public officials to become more service and citizen-centric; it is an open and straightforward platform that allows citizens to hold their elected representatives responsible for the services provided, and must be infused into all management processes as well as be rolled out to the front lines of government service delivery (Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), 2013)

The South African Constitution and Bill of Rights states that “The Public Service is the servant of the people, and must be accessible, transparent, accountable, efficient and free of corruption.” (White Paper on Reconstruction and Development, 1994). Earlier on in this research, it has been mentioned that traditionally, among African leaders of old, some core values of African leadership were identified, such as: respect for the dignity of others, group solidarity, teamwork, *service to others*, the spirit of harmony and interdependence among others (Mbigi, 2002). It is notable that the critical aspect, *service to others*, is present in Batho Pele just as it is in servant leadership.

In keeping with international set standards in the provision of public services, and to show recognition of the importance of putting people first in service delivery, the South African government in 1997 juxtaposed the Batho Pele standards and the UK Citizen Charter of 1991. In any country, the central idea behind adopting a public service charter is to improve responsiveness and transparency of public service provision (Löffler, Salvador, & Zmeškal, 2017; Clark, 2012). Table 1 below shows that indeed, servant leadership existed in the African context, prior to its extensive publication in scholarly literature.

Table 1- Juxtaposition of the Batho Pele Principles and the UK Citizen Charter

Batho Pele Principles	Charter Mark Criteria
BP1: Consultation: Citizens should be consulted about the level and quality of the public services they receive and, wherever possible, should be given a choice about the services that are offered.	C3 Consult and involve: Consult and involve present and potential users of public services as well as those who work in them; and use their views to improve the services provided.
BP2: Service Standards: Citizens should be told what level and quality of public services they will receive so that they are aware of what to expect.	C1 Set Standards: Set clear standards of service that users can expect...
BP3: Access: All citizens should have equal access to the services to which they are entitled.	C4 Encourage access and the promotion of Choice: Make services easily available to everyone who needs them...
BP4: Courtesy: Citizens should be treated with courtesy and consideration.	C5 Treat all fairly: respect their privacy and dignity, be helpful and courteous, and pay particular attention to those with special needs
BP5: Information: Citizens should be given full, accurate information about the public services they are entitled to receive.	C2 Be open and provide full information: Be open, and communicate clearly and effectively in plain language... provide full information about services, their cost and how well they perform.
BP6: Openness and transparency: Citizens should be told how national and provincial departments are run, how much they cost, and who is in charge.	Be open and provide full information
BP7: Redress: If the promised standard of service is not delivered, citizens should be offered an apology, a full explanation and a speedy and effective remedy; when complaints are made, citizens should receive a sympathetic, positive response.	C6 Put things right when they go wrong Put things right quickly and effectively; learn from complaints; and have a clear, well publicized and easy-to-use complaints procedure, with independent review wherever possible.
BP8: Value for money: Public services should be provided economically and efficiently to give	C7 Use resources effectively: to provide best value for taxpayers and users.

citizens the best possible value for money.	
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Adapted from: Batho Pele Policy Review, (2003)

In spite of such credible intentions meant to transform the hearts and minds of South African public servants and put the citizens at the core of their operations, various reports have highlighted the poor state of Batho Pele compliance by several government departments (Mutangabende, 2016), with the victim always being the ordinary citizen. Service delivery riots and other physical and emotional outbursts are frequently the result of relative nonconformance to Batho Pele (Steyn-Kotze & Taylor, 2010). South Africa is considered as the “riotous protest capital of the world” as its citizens have come to believe that the only way to get immediate action from government is to stage demonstrations, which often turn out to be violent (Breakfast & Nomarwayi, 2019; South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), 2020; Daily Maverick, 2021). Booysen, in Lodge and Mottiar, (2015), states that violent demonstrations are more likely in regions that have a very poor track record in the delivery of public sector services. This points to the fact that although it is noble and worthwhile to practice servant leadership in the South African context, this seems to be dismally failing, not because there is anything wrong with the precepts, but faulty ingrained characteristics within the leadership, which calls for training as an intervention to change the leadership mindset. This leadership, with its failure to adopt servant leadership in serving the community, is expected to lead subordinates under them to execute service delivery under the very difficult conditions brought about by VUCA.

2.2.4 VUCA acronym explained

The acronym VUCA stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (Arda, Aslan & Alpkan, 2016; Saleh & Watson, 2017; Wright & Wigmore, 2023). According to Wright and Wigmore, (2023) as well as Adani (2022), *Volatile* stands for something that has a high probability of undergoing speedy and unpredictable change, more so for the worse; *Uncertain* denotes difficulty in understanding the present, and no way of predicting the future; *Complex* stands for something that is difficult to analyze or understand, something that is complicated and intricate; while *Ambiguous* means having a meaning that can be interpreted in many different ways, lacks clarity. In the field of leadership studies, VUCA describes the challenging conditions in which organizations as well as leaders must operate. By recognizing and acknowledging the elements of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, leaders can have a framework that can better prepare them to adopt servant leadership in an ever-changing environment.

2.2.5 Challenges of Servant Leadership in a VUCA environment

The philosophy of servant leadership requests that leaders serve their employees, by growing their empowerment, autonomy, and commitment, with positive consequences for customers and the

organization (Gissing, 2019). Practicing servant leadership in a VUCA environment is very difficult as it is fraught with serious drawbacks, such as:

- Complexity and uncertainty: The public sector operates in a complex and ever-changing environment with various challenges (OECD, 2017) and Servant leaders may battle to find solutions and to adapt to rapidly evolving circumstances such as rapid technological advancements, unpredictable events like pandemics or natural disasters, global economic shifts, and wars such as Russia/Ukraine crisis.
- Accountability and decision-making: Servant leadership prioritizes consensus-building and participatory decision-making (Hai & Van, 2021). Servant leadership is not suitable for all situations, and in this instance, it is not conducive to rapid decision making, whereas there are instances where quick and decisive actions are necessary. Balancing servant leadership with the need for timely and accountable decision-making can be a delicate task.
- Resistance to change: Leadership has always been practiced in organizations in various ways and with different leadership styles (Lemoine et al, 2016). In hierarchical public sector structures, adopting servant leadership principles may require difficult cultural change and may be met with resistance from traditional top-down approaches. Rigid organizational cultures and bureaucratic systems can block the adoption of more inclusive and collaborative leadership styles.
- Balancing stakeholder demands: Public sector leaders must address the diverse needs of multiple stakeholders, such as politically elected officials, members of the public (who claim rights), interest groups, as well as employees (National School of Government, 2022). Balancing these demands while adhering to servant leadership principles presents challenges.
- Time constraints: Servant leadership requires significant time investment in fostering a supportive culture, building relationships, and understanding team members' needs (Eva, Robin, Sendja, van Dierendonck & Lidene, 2019). Servant leaders may face difficulties in dedicating sufficient time to such activities in a fast-paced VUCA world.

Although such challenges exist, if public service leaders could be trained to practice Servant leadership, then the civil servants serving under them would emulate them and see in their practices an opportunity to provide their fellow citizens with sterling public services. Servant leadership, however, is not a path well-trodden. It calls for a great personal sacrifice, requiring one to abandon one's professional focus to the team that one is responsible for (Naithani, 2019). One of the tenets of servant leadership is empathy. As such, one must accept that one is also as imperfect as the people one leads and is also on an ongoing journey of learning and growth; Servant-leaders envision themselves as part of the system they serve (Richardson, 2017). As a leader, unmasking oneself to such an extent implies showing open vulnerability, which is not easy for a leader to do. This is why

the road of servant leadership is less travelled. Leaders find themselves between conflicting demands and are subject to an endless series of paradoxes and dilemmas.

2.2.6 Possibilities of Public service servant leadership in a VUCA environment

Every cloud has a silver lining. While servant leadership faces challenges in a VUCA world, possibilities are also created. As leaders make every effort to navigate the unique demands of VUCA, more adaptable, resilient and collaborative public sector organizations are created. At the end of it all, public sector leaders can effectively servant-lead their teams to provide sterling service delivery. Other possibilities include:

- Higher engagement and better staff retention: In VUCA times, employee morale and job satisfaction can be negatively affected by the chaotic and unpredictable unfolding of events. Servant leadership focuses on employee well-being and development, which can greatly contribute to employee engagement and retention.
- Enhanced resilience: Servant leaders emphasize understanding and empathizing with their subordinates, making them better equipped to adapt to the VUCA environment. The quality of fostering a culture of learning and openness to change, enhances organizational adaptability.
- Improved stakeholder trust and support as well as improved public perception, accrue to the service providers because of their trait of prioritizing the needs of citizens and stakeholders; they are also viewed as legitimate.
- Resilient organizational culture is acquired as servant leadership promotes a culture of trust, transparency, and adaptability in employees, enabling them to better cope with the challenges posed by a VUCA environment.
- Collaborative problem-solving: innovative and effective solutions to complex problems in the public sector are easily hatched since Servant leaders encourage open communication and collaboration within their teams.

By focusing on these available opportunities, servant leaders can effectively navigate the challenges of a VUCA world in the public sector.

3. Research Methodology

According to the researchers, interpretivism was the most appropriate guiding philosophy for determining the ontological, epistemological, methodological positions of the study. The research uses a qualitative research design which enables different “lenses” through which to view complicated problems as well as social issues, providing a framework within which to conduct the analysis.

This systematic review of servant leadership as well as its application in the public service has been informed by the South African as well as international literature and commentaries about the topic. It

is based on a search for qualitative articles from various electronic databases such as Google Scholar, EBSCOHOST and Sabinet, amongst others, which were scanned for information on Servant leadership in the public sector, challenges as well as possibilities in a VUCA world.

Literature on the genesis of servant leadership as well as its application in the public service, was systematically selected. Literature on the subject at hand was gleaned from critical secondary data sources such as earlier research studies, official communiques (Statutory Reports); Government Gazettes, empirical business research publications in leadership and management journals, newspaper articles and organizational communiques. Observations and comments from academics and public officials (in the news and on the various media platforms) who have contributed to public sector reforms have been drawn upon. Unpublished papers and editorial studies were excluded. The qualitative data thus gathered were thematically analyzed.

Determining Sample sources for the study

Key words such as Servant leadership, VUCA world, public service accountability, and public service organization were used as search strings, and several articles surfaced that were very close to the topic under consideration. The subject of servant leadership has been fervently researched in the Western construct (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Lee, et al., 2020; Mittal & Dorfman, 2012), but the same is rather scarce in other regions, Africa in particular. Locating such articles was rather tedious, while the topic of VUCA in accountability of leadership and management in the public sector domain was amply available. This literature had to have been published in English from the year 2000 to 2023, as the study had to take into consideration the important and historically diverse contexts of the development of ubuntu as a leadership philosophy and experiences from the African contexts. In terms of the theoretical aspect, literature was gleaned from sources even prior to this time demarcation. The population comprised of 64 articles that were closely related to accountability and servant leadership, but this narrowed down to 25 as the search words had to include VUCA and public service organization. This therefore became the sample. Data were reported in keeping with the research code of ethics (Tripathy, 2013).

Themes, and thematic analysis of direct citations on Servant leadership in the public sector and its attendant challenges and possibilities in a VUCA world were gleaned from the reviewed literature and presented in a compilation of the most relevant verbatims.

Data Presentation

Below is a compilation of the most relevant verbatims on the main themes- servant leadership, VUCA world, public sector and public accountability. Table 1 below shows these themes in bold.

Table 2: Main themes of the study

<p>Servant leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a model that identifies serving others-including employees, customers, and community-as the number-one priority” (Spears, 2002; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011). -a form of leadership that captures the dimensions of personal integrity, social responsibility, offers a radically different way of leading that nurtures healthy organizational relationships while staying on the edge of dynamic change and rarely seen in today’s leader. (SGR. 2023) - influence subordinates by being role models and providing necessary guidance and training, helping them to develop their sense of service and behavior (Bauer et al., 2019); - the servant leader approaches situations and organizations from the perspective of a servant first, pursuing leadership secondarily (Greenfield,1970; Kenton, James & Schmitt, 2023), 	<p>VUCA world</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bearing qualities of the unexpected; turbulence; situations and events being subject to frequent, rapid and significant change occurring in an unpredictable manner. (Beabout, 2012, Taguma & Gabriel, 2018, Wright & Wigmore, 2023). - the absence of predictability; the cause and effect are not well understood, (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Wright & Wigmore, 2023); unclear which direction events will go; and this lack of stability does not allow leaders to look to the past for guidance in how to predict future events (Cook, 2015). - existence of a multiplicity of issues and factors, some of which may be intricately interconnected, causing difficulty to understand issues in solving problems (Baltaci & Balci, 2017; Obolensky, 2014, Wright & Wigmore, 2023); escalate the difficulty of making good decisions (Moodie, 2016)
<p>Public Accountability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - key principle of modern public governance; public officials who are custodians of the state resources are answerable and responsible for their decisions, and actions within the public domain, (Rulashe & Ijeoma, 2022) -necessary because there needs to be a relationship of trust between the public sector and members of the public (Controller and Auditor-General, 2019:18). - essential for social cohesion and well-being as it affects governments’ ability to govern and enables them to act without having to resort to coercion (OECD, 2013) 	<p>Public sector</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -consists of institutional units that are legal entities with political responsibilities established through the political process mainly to produce non-market goods and services for individual and public consumption (South African Reserve Bank (2011) -It is part of the economic system that is controlled by national, state or provincial, and local governments, and provides several governmental services (Morim, Inácio & Vieira, 2020) - servant of the people; must be accessible, transparent, accountable, efficient and free of corruption (RDP White Paper, 1994) - critical role in an economy, is empowered to

- A decline in public accountability can lead to lower rates of compliance with the set rules and regulations (Breakfast, Bradshaw & Nomarwayi ;2019; OECD, 2013)

regulate the nation’s life, security and order as well as the equitable allocation of services and resources (Mbandlwa, 2020)

4. Results and Findings

This research sought to establish how servant leadership in a VUCA environment can be practiced to enhance the South African public sector organizational performance. Servant Leadership, Public accountability, Public sector and VUCA world have emerged as the main themes of this study, among others, and as such, the discussion will center on these. The Servant leadership framework (Figure 3) will be used in the discussion.

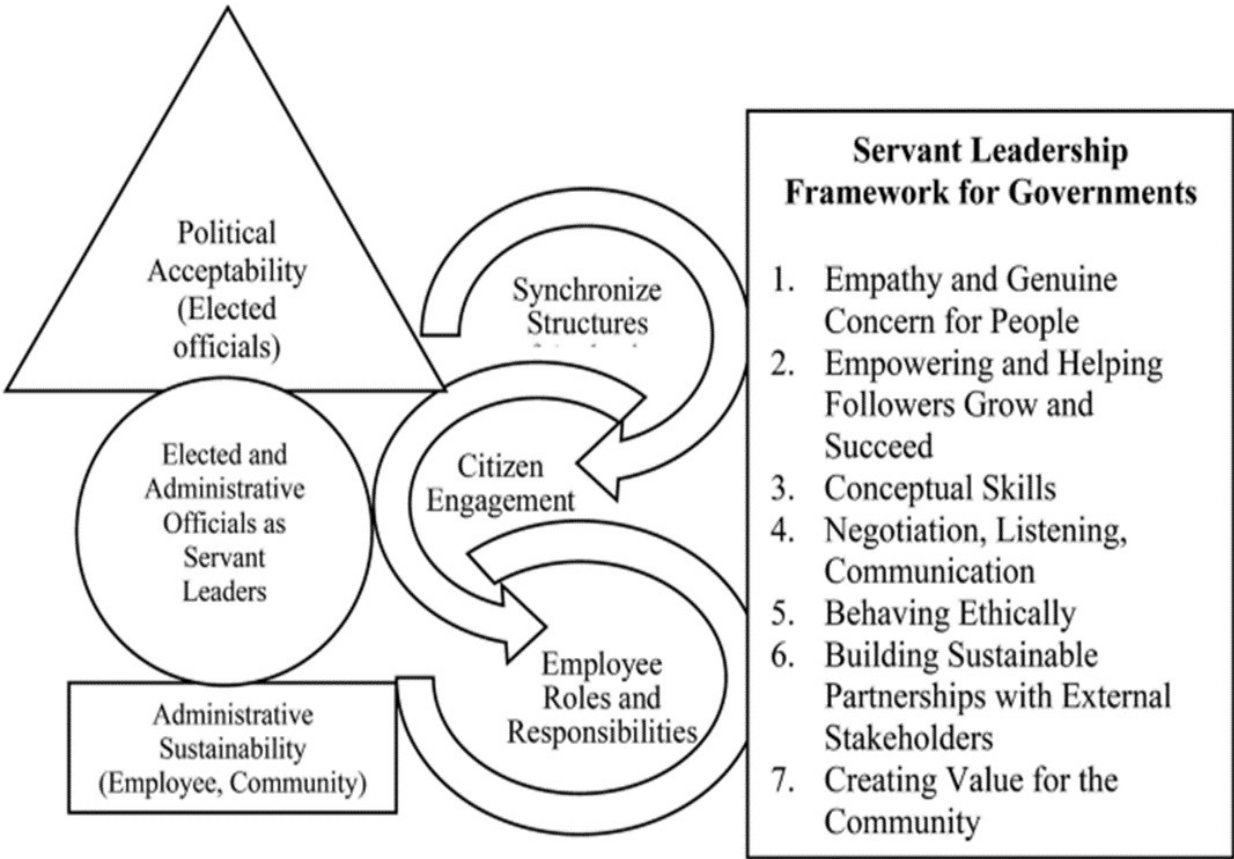


Figure 3: Servant-Leadership Framework (Adopted from Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2023)

It has been pointed out earlier on that the Public sector has political orientations (South African Reserve Bank; 2011:37; Morim, Inácio & Vieira, 2020:11). This aspect of being politically oriented presents a paradoxical context. At one end, Governments the world over have high red tape and a work culture with strict administrative rules, procedures, and policies that can restrain organizational

members' free-thinking behavior and abilities - in contrast to servant leadership values (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2023). On the other hand, governments are also the custodians of democracy as they provide public services to build the trust and confidence of the members of public in a democracy (National School of Government, 2022). Developing servant leaders is critical in the public sector to prevent such paradoxes. To balance these competing values, and at the same time be the enablers of employee and community well-being, servant leadership must emerge as a strong fit in public service organizations. This is ably shown on the framework (Figure 3) where "Elected and Administrative officials as servant leaders" are ideally placed—they are balancing the interests of both the politicians as well as the changing needs of the community in the tumultuous VUCA world. For leadership to be prepared to lead in such a precarious environment calls for the cultivation of a Servant leadership mindset; developing a deep commitment to serving others and embracing humility, empathy, and a genuine desire to support the growth and well-being of the team serving under the servant leader. This development can be enabled by instilling the values of Servant leadership listed on the right hand of the framework.

4.1 The theme of Servant leadership

Servant leadership emerges as a highly inclusive theory that incorporates the needs of two interdependent groups: the public service and members of the public. It is recommended that Servant leadership be practiced as a way of instilling a serving culture and building a bridging trust between the two for a sustained community well-being and prosperous future of the society. As stated earlier in the research, "... trust is essential for social cohesion and well-being as it affects governments' ability to govern and enables them to act without having to resort to coercion", (School of Government, 2022), and that a decline in trust can lead to lower rates of compliance with the set rules and regulations. Servant leaders are needed to help stabilize this relationship, the absence of which will lead to serious protest action and other various forms of expression of discontent with the government.

4.2 The theme of Public accountability

Accountability plays an important role in public servant leadership, as it stabilizes the relationship between leaders and the public. As public leaders (mostly politicians), it is essential to uphold accountability to members of the public upon whose trust the politicians rely for their governance. This accountability includes responsibilities such as stewardship, serving others, and safeguarding the public's interests, systematically meeting their expectations and addressing practical issues that are pertinent to them, including being answerable for one's actions. On the Framework, (Figure 3), such activities are included under citizen engagement, which is '... an open and accountable process through which individuals and groups from selected communities can exchange views and ideas and influence decision making' (UNDP, 2016)

4.3 Public Sector as a theme

Government has the dual responsibility of involving its citizens in the decision-making process as well as being accountable for its actions whilst serving them. In South Africa, public participation in policymaking and in decision-making is supported by legislation (The Constitution and the White Paper on Local Government (1998), mainly because South Africa is a democratic state, and this public participation plays a vital role in cementing the democracy of a country (Bellamy, 2012). To enhance this citizen engagement, the state needs to establish mechanisms that will enable the citizens to get involved. International IDEA, (2016) suggest that this process could involve conducting focus groups and citizen interviews on what the citizens need when it comes to service provision and delivery (consultation in different forms); available budgets need to be made public, time frames for implementation of public sector programmes and projects need to be known and other logistics need to be made public to the citizens to avoid any misconceptions. Thereafter, the government as the prime servant leader needs to act on that feedback from citizens, and in this way, the community is not considered as an afterthought by these servant leaders; it is primary.

4.4 VUCA as a theme

It is generally agreed that there is widespread consensus that the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) environment has contributed to the subpar quality of public sector service delivery in South Africa (Barbier & Tengeh, 2022). The complexity of challenges and issues faced by leadership in public service organizations escalates during this time. Servant leaders are called upon to invest more time and effort in understanding these complexities (which is not easy in a fast-paced VUCA world); quickly making decisions and providing the necessary guidance and support to their teams. There is need for more extensive research, collaboration, and adaptability on the part of the servant leaders.

Uncertainty is a hallmark of VUCA environments; Servant leaders need to be able to deal with the ambiguity by being willing to revise their strategies frequently and be accommodative of new ideas and solutions; they must be adept at interpreting and navigating these ambiguities to ensure that they effectively serve the interests of public members. Continuous learning and development need to be prioritized during this time for both the leaders and their team. They need to be continuously informed about the latest developments in their areas of service, the latest trends, and prevailing best practices in public administration and leadership. In all the volatility, ethical leadership is crucial, and Servant leaders are called upon to maintain high ethical standards and ensure accountability in their organizations.

In spite of the existence of VUCA factors and their enormous challenges to the practice of servant leadership, their presence enforce adaptability, collaboration, and ethical leadership in Servant

leaders, who in turn become proactive, thereby contributing to better governance and service delivery in uncertain environments.

4.5 The nexus between Public sector and public accountability

There is an intricate relationship between these two themes. Accountability promotes transparency in government operations, ascribes morality to servant leadership, and this helps members of the public to understand how tax money is spent and to check whether government actions are in the interests of the public. When public officials are seen to be answerable for their actions and decisions, the members of public are more likely to have trust and confidence in the government's ability to serve their interests as espoused by Bandura's (1977) Social learning theory which postulates that followers tend to observe their moral leaders' behaviors because such leaders are attractive and are credible role models. The need for unquestionable morality in accountable public sector Servant leadership perfectly dovetails and resonates with the tenets of Servant leadership as shown in the Venn diagram (Figure 1) and supports Blau's Social exchange theory as applied within moral forms of leadership.

5. Implications for leadership

Below is a diagrammatical presentation of the implications for the practice of servant leadership in the public service sector. Such a presentation is advantageous in that it will make it easier for managers to quickly grasp the core implications of servant leadership; for quick engagement since diagrams are often more engaging than text, and aids the memory as visual aids can enhance retention of information. Lastly, leaders can use the diagram as a quick reference guide for implementing servant leadership practices in a VUCA environment.

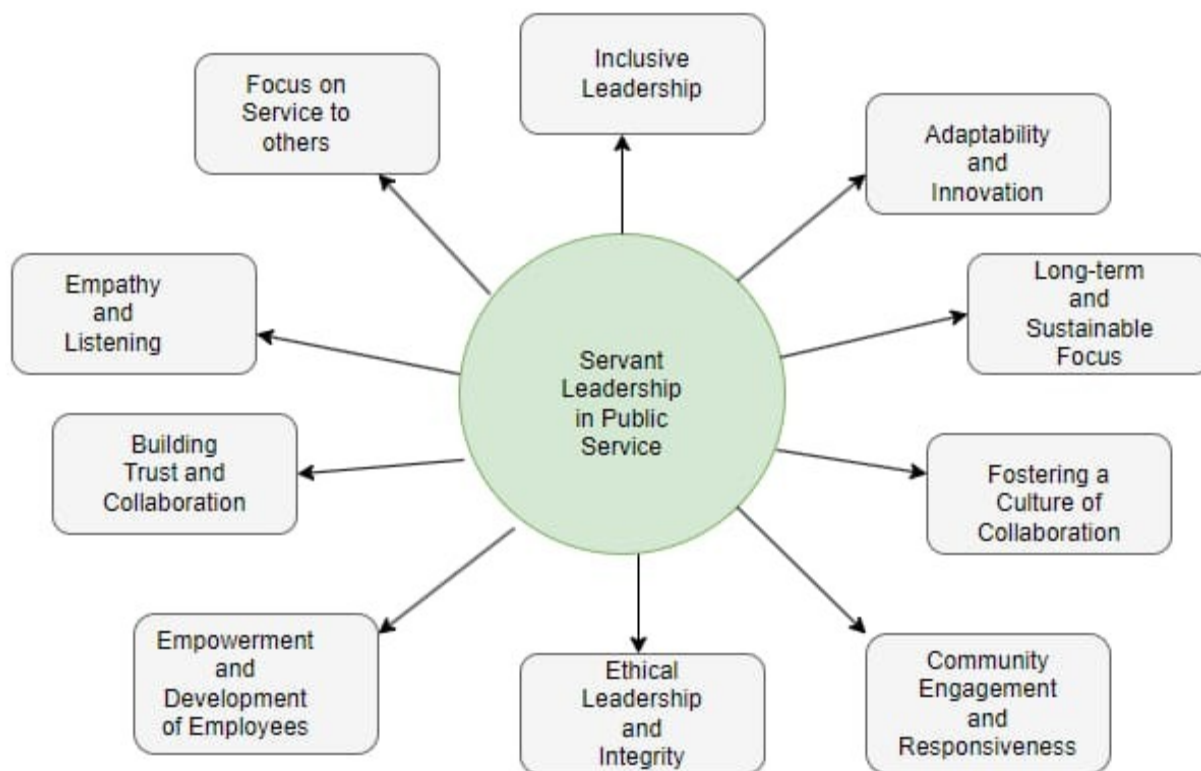


Figure 4: Implications for Leadership (Own Compilation)

6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

6.1 Conclusions

The practice of servant leadership in the public sector during a VUCA period poses many challenges, but the type of leadership is conducive to a service sector because its behaviors positively impact many desirable relevant outcomes, and organizations would benefit by developing their current leaders into servant leaders.

Leaders' commitment to public sector leadership and accountability enhances a country's international reputation by signaling to the global community the country's commitment to good governance, which in turn can attract foreign investment and support for development initiatives. In the final analysis, public sector leadership's accountability empowers citizens to play their role of applying checks and balances to governmental officials so that they practice Servant leadership, prevents corruption, and ensures that public resources are used for the benefit of all, as espoused in the Batho Pele Principles of public service leadership in the context of South Africa, ultimately contributing to the nation's development by timeously bringing service to the general citizen's door step, resulting in stability and positive international recognition.

6.2 Limitations

While the study of servant leadership in any country's public sector within a VUCA context can provide valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge and address some of the attendant limitations of this study, such as:

-Diversity of Public sector organizations: Since the SA public sector comprises a wide range of organizations, each with different cultures, functions and structures, it is not possible to draw broad conclusions, thus findings may not be equally applicable across all the existent types of public sector organizations in South Africa

-Evolving nature of Public sector challenges: the challenges faced are not constant, which can make the research and its findings to become quickly outdated, needing frequent updates to remain relevant and accurate

- Contextual differences: The South African public sector has unique characteristics and challenges which may be significantly different from those experienced in other sectors or regions, which may greatly influence the applicability of the servant leadership principles.

- Interpretation subjectivity: this research is a systematic review. Interpretation of the qualitative data is thus subjected to researcher bias, which can influence the conclusions drawn.

6.3 Future research

Servant leadership is one of the most popularly discussed in scholarly literature but is the least critically examined leadership philosophy (Makau, 2021). As such, critical research on servant leadership in the public sector worldwide in top-tier journals is sparse (Eva et al., 2018). More critical research is needed to bring to the fore certain overlooked aspects of this type of leadership which are relevant to public sector performance (Lee et al, 2020).

There is also a need to conduct comparative studies on the effectiveness of servant leadership in different cultural, economic, and political contexts as well as other contexts, which will assist in providing more balanced generalizability of factors that may influence the success of servant leadership practices.

6.4 Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, this research can expand on the Servant Leadership Theory by exposing its applicability and effectiveness in the context of the South African public service sector and can also demonstrate how servant leadership can be used along with other leadership models in the public sector.

6.5 Practical Contributions

Practically, this study can offer guidelines and recommendations for public sector leaders on how to effectively implement servant leadership principles and improve organizational performance as well as employee satisfaction. Finally, the research has concluded that, for public service leadership to successfully servant lead, they need to be trained to develop a servant leadership mindset. This study can thus inform the development and the design of the necessary training programs that are tailored to cultivate servant leadership skills among public sector leaders.

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