**Servant Leadership in the Public Sector: Employee Perspective**

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore how servant leadership affects public sector employee engagement, organisational ethical climate, and public sector reform, of two public enterprises, in the under-researched public sector of a Small Island Developing State (SID) - Fiji. Qualitative, longitudinal, case studies examined the servant leadership experience of employees of two public enterprises. Data was collected from employees of both public enterprises through in-depth interviews and participant observations, and was thematically analysed. Pre-existing conditions of both enterprises, and lack of employee familiarity with servant leadership, resulted in different levels of employee acceptance of servant leadership, which affected employee engagement, organisational ethical climate, and public sector reform.

**Keywords:** Servant leadership,Public Sector,Small Island Developing States,Fiji

**Paper type** Case study

**Introduction**

Leadership has been and continues to be one of the most thoroughly researched social influence processes in the organisational sciences and the related professional practices (Yammarino, 2013). This is because effective leadership is foundational to an organisation’s ability to rapidly and continuously adapt to the ever-changing local and global environmental conditions that challenge the status quo (Zorn *et al.,* 2000). Consequently, “a critical factor to understanding the success of an organisation, then, is to study its leaders” (Parris and Peachey, 2012: 377).

However, due to a general degradation of confidence in present-day leadership (Mittal and Dorfman, 2012) and leaders’ self-serving focus (O’Reilly *et al*., 2014), there has emerged a growing concern for an alternative form of leadership (Mittal and Dorfman, 2012). Also, an increasing number of academics argue effective leadership is based on self-sacrificing motives and service to followers (subordinates), rather than service to self and maximising leader benefits (Liden *et al*., 2014).

Servant leadership is suggested to be an alternative form of leadership in which the leader overwhelmingly respects other human beings and yet still operates to achieve organisational goals (Bell and Habel, 2009; Ehrhart, 2004). Servant leaders tend to place the needs of their followers before the leader’s own needs (Greenleaf, 1970, 1977). This leadership is considered a natural model in the public sector. This is mainly due to the reason that the leaders in public organisations are thought to have stronger intentions to serve in comparison to leaders who lead private organisations (Gabris & Simo, 1995).

Increasing numbers of such studies suggest servant leaders promote positive employee engagement, more contented and better-performing followers (Carter and Baghurst, 2013), and foster perceptions of an ethical climate (Burton *et al.,* 2017), resulting in positive organisational outcomes (Liden *et al*., 2014) that enable organisations to establish and maintain a competitive advantage. But most of the research carried out by researchers on servant leadership has been mainly undertaken for developing theoretical frameworks and also for establishing reliable and valid measurement tools for researching servant leadership empirically. There is, also limited research on servant leadership in the public sector (Miao *et al*., 2014), and of the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement (Coetzer *et al*., 2017) and ethical climate (Burton *et al*., 2017).

Hence, numerous gaps exist in literature in relation to servant leadership. Researchers have predominantly considered this style of leadership in western contexts (Winston and Ryan, 2008), but given little attention to examination of the same in other cultural contexts (Han *et al*., 2010). We are also unaware of any previous published research on servant leadership in Small Island Developing States (SIDs) such as Fiji. Finally, servant leadership as a construct, still remains an underdeveloped and obscure phenomenon, still to be organized into an assembly of congruous management practices (Brumback, 1999).

In attempting to address these research gaps, this study sheds light on the phenomenon of servant leadership (Brown and Bryant, 2015) as employed in two uniquely different reforming public enterprises in Fiji, namely the Fiji Islands Maritime Safety Administration (FIMSA) and the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF). This paper first provides a review of contemporary literature on servant leadership, and further highlights the gaps in current literature. The research objectives and questions, methodology and background for this study follow. Findings and interpretation are then discussed, and conclusions and research implications close the article.

**Literature Review**

Servant leadership was suggested to have been introduced in the USA based on American research (Hannay, 2009). However well before this, servant leadership can be accredited to Christianity and biblical teachings (Zou *et al*., 2015). Since its introduction, servant leadership has re-surfaced over the past two decades as an ethical and moral leadership style (Dinh *et al*., 2014). Recent conceptual and empirical leadership research has focused on the servant leadership style (e.g., Burton *et al.,* 2017; Coetzer *et al*., 2017; Lacroix and Pircher Verdorfer, 2017; Miao *et al*., 2014), as organisational scholars shift their attention from self-serving leadership styles to more relational ones (Avolio *et al*., 2009) that emphasise leader-follower relationships (Wang *et al*., 2014).

Literature informs of various definitions as well as a lack of consensus on what servant leadership entails (Mittal and Dorfman, 2012). Notwithstanding, the definition that is upheld in this research, and the understanding that was shared with the interviewees, is based on the definition suggested by the servant leadership pioneer Greenleaf (1977): a leadership style that emphasises a leader’s responsibility towards the success of an organisation, but also includes a leader's moral responsibility to his or her subordinates (‘followers’) and other stakeholders (Peterson et al., 2012). Other researchers (Hale and Fields, 2007: 397) express this leadership style as “places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader, emphasizing leader behaviours that focus on follower development, and de-emphasizing gloriﬁcation of the leader.” While even other researchers (Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002; Van Dierendonck, 2011) provide differing definitions of servant leadership.

Empowerment, stewardship, authenticity, humility, interpersonal acceptance, and providing direction are the characteristics of servant leadership as developed by van Dierendonck (2011) and his colleagues van Dierendonck & Nuitjen (2011), and van Dierendonck & Patterson (2015). Other characteristics of servant leadership as identified by Greenleaf (1998) include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, commitment to the growth of people, and community building. There are also other scholars who continue to redefine servant leadership characteristics (Brown and Bryant, 2015; Russel and Stone, 2002; Van Dierendonck, 2011).

In addition, empirical evidence highlights conceptual differences between servant leadership and the other leadership styles (Van Dierendonck, 2011). The transformational leadership style (which appears to have many similarities with the servant leadership style) (Mittal and Dorfman, 2012) argues follower inspiration as being dependent on leadership charisma and emotions. However, servant leadership focuses on enabling a learning organisation where individual appreciation adds value (Van Dierendonck, 2011), and fosters high levels of trust in management, leading to smoother organisational operations (Ehrhart, 2004). On the contrary, transformational leaders’ key responsibility is to their organisations and to themselves, and for them, follower growth and development should be in line with what is best for the organisation (Graham, 1991). Such a linear focus on organisational outcomes may not cater fully for the follower needs (Burton *et al*., 2017: 231).

Also, minimal research into the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement is available (Coetzer *et al*., 2017). Nonetheless, some studies (Carter and Baghurst, 2013; De Clerq *et al*., 2014) suggest a strong correlation between servant leadership and employee engagement, while other studies identify the mediating effect of goal congruence on the correlation between servant leadership and employee engagement (De Clerq *et al*., 2014).

Not only this, but research is also underdeveloped in the relationship between leadership and its function in promoting ethical behaviour and ethical climate (Menzel, 2015), particularly in the public sector where ethical leadership style matters much (Heres and Lasthuizen, 2012). Burton *et al.* (2017: 229) recent research attempted to fill this void and found, “servant leadership was directly related to trust in leadership and perceptions of an ethical climate”. They also mention a growing body of research does point out the relationship between an ethical organisational climate enabled by servant leaders and organisational outcomes. It is also suggested servant leaders are in a position to shape the organisational norms and values that explicitly indicate and guide the moral behaviour of all (Schaubroeck et al., 2011), therein improving the ethical culture of public and private sector organisations. This is in stark comparison to other leadership styles (Giampetro-Meyer et al., 1998). The call is now for studies that investigate the scope and magnitude of the influence of servant leadership on a range of multilevel outcomes (Hunter et al., 2013: 316).

Many questions thus remain unanswered (Zou et al., 2015). Furthermore, most prior empirical studies that investigated effects of other leadership styles on ﬁrm performance (e.g., Ensley et al., 2006; Ling et al., 2008; Waldman et al., 2004) reported mixed results. All in all, scholars have ignored not only the organisational-level outcomes of servant leadership but also a proper investigation of the relationship between servant leadership and ﬁrm performance (Peterson et al., 2012). In his recent article, Peterson et al. (2012) posed a relevant question relating to the organisational-level implications of servant leadership behaviours which is still underexplored. They profess the link between CEO servant leadership and an important organisational-level outcome like ﬁrm performance is an interesting issue, worthy of investigation (Peterson et al., 2012) since a CEO’s leadership behaviour can impact seriously on ﬁrm profitability (Finkelstein et al., 2009). However, such research, especially empirical in nature, is lacking and very much needed (Peterson et al., 2012).

Overall, the nature and importance of servant leadership does need further research to allow for better understanding of what brings about servant leadership in [changing public] organisations, and this in turn will help to respond to calls by researchers (Avolio, 2007; DeRue, *et al*., 2011) to conceptually and empirically highlight the antecedents and aftermath of different leadership styles (Peterson *et al*., 2012). As it is, “the complex environment and the formalized organizational structure of public organizations place contradictory demands on the role of public managers as change leaders” (Van der Voet *et al*., 2016: 858).

**Research Objectives and Questions**

This study attempts to fill some of the void mentioned in the aforementioned review of literature by qualitatively investigating various aspects of servant leadership, employee engagement, organisational ethical climate, and public sector reform, in the under-researched public sector of SIDs such as Fiji. To the best of our knowledge, there has been no prior published research on servant leadership in the public sector of SIDs such as Fiji; and research on servant leadership in the public sector worldwide in top-tier journals is also sparse. Interestingly, some studies on other leadership styles like transformational leadership state in public organisations “the transformational leadership of direct supervisors is central in the implementation of change” (Van der Voet et al., 2016: 858). In this respect, this study may bring to the forefront certain overlooked critical aspects of leadership relevant to public sector performance (Peterson *et al*., 2012). Like Peterson *et al*. (2012), we draw arguments from the importance of servant leadership to public sector performance, both practically and from the servant leadership literature. Burton *et al*. (2017: 238) have called for the use of “qualitative methodology to help understand the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of the relationships among servant leadership, trust, organizational justice, and ethical climate.” Hunter *et al*. (2013: 329) also called for “additional study so that managers and scholars alike may better understand why and how servant leadership affects employees and organizations.”

This study’s results will have important theoretical and practical implications for practicing public sector managers, public organisations and governments that promote reforms in the public sector through effective leadership (Peterson *et al*., 2012). This study is also significant, considering reforming public sectors have “been wrestling with the best way to address the unethical behavior...for years” (Burton *et al*., 2017: 236). Servant leadership does make sense in the public sector since it also includes stakeholder concerns. Like the research of Hunter *et al*. (2013: 328), “the most important contribution of our study is the [qualitative based in-depth case studies] empirical evidence” on the many underexplored or unexplored aspects of servant leadership in the public sector, making this study a wholesome contribution of new knowledge, and adding to the current limited literature on servant leadership in the public sector.

The following seven research questions are posed in this study:

*RQ1.* How do employees describe their servant leadership experience?

*RQ2.* How do employees’ servant leadership experiences vary from prior leadership experiences?

*RQ3.* How do employees perceive the servant leadership traits experienced?

*RQ4.* How do employees perceive the leader-follower behaviour experienced?

*RQ5.* How do employees perceive servant leadership influenced the outcomes of the public enterprises?

*RQ6.* How do employees perceive servant leadership influenced the ethical climate of the public enterprises?

*RQ7.* How do employees perceive servant leadership influenced reform of the public enterprises?

**Methodology**

This multiple case study had embedded units (employees of FMISA and MSAF), was qualitative, longitudinal (FIMSA in 2011, and MSAF in 2013-2014) and exploratory in nature, and enabled the researchers to analyse data within each situation and across situations (Yin, 2003), in order to identify and understand the similarities and differences between the cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008), answer the research questions, and enable theoretical evolution (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Multiple sources of data were collected from the whole population of FIMSA employees which totalled 93, and MSAF employees which totalled 66 (Slack and Singh, 2017), through a combination of in-depth interviews and participant observations, which allowed for very detailed study of the employees (Thompson, 2000, p.8). Before the in-depth interviews and participant observations commenced, interviewees were introduced to the principal research (who had extensive knowledge of the enterprises), were informed that Ministerial approval had been granted for this research, the research was for academic purposes, employee involvement was on a voluntary basis, and that their names would not be disclosed.

Interview questions were open-ended so that interviewees could respond in their own way, unclear answers were clarified on the spot, and responses by interviewees were probed and restated for clarification and elaboration (Wilkinson and Birmingham, 2003). This helped generate a rich source of field data. After the interviews, the researchers rephrased the interviewee responses in a summarised manner to correct inaccuracies and to ensure that the receiving, understanding and interpretation of information was the same as expressed by interviewees (Wilkinson and Birmingham, 2003). This paper used Gillham’s (2001) transcription and analytical framework for the recording, verification and analysis of data as follows. Substantive statements in each interview note were highlighted while repetitions, digressions and irrelevant materials were put aside. Similar statements made by interviewees were noted as similarities and dissimilarities were marked. After going through all interview notes, the researcher went back to these notes a second time to highlight substantive statements that might have been missed out in the first reading. Following this, the researcher went through the collected primary documents to highlight noteworthy information. The researcher then went back to the entire interview notes and documents to note the highlighted statements and categorised these as the main events during the life of the case studies.

For validity and reliability reasons, statements were cross-referenced between interviewees’ responses. The dissimilar statements were marked as queries and were later clarified. The collected data was analysed on the basis of findings from subject case studies in the form of responses from the interviewees and from primary and secondary sources which helped the researcher to document, explain, compare, contrast and understand the case studies.

The participant observation method adopted involved the immersion of the principal researcher in the social settings of both enterprises, to enable selective observation of employee behaviours, listening to discussions between employees, and questioning employees on the spot (Bryman, 2004, p.542). Conducting the observations involved “fitting in, active seeing, short-term memory…recording detailed field notes…” (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p.17). Field notes were a critical part of the observation method and involved writing as field work proceeded and ensuring entries were up-to-date. Specific field notes recorded the day, date, time, background, quotations and comments made, a “thick description” of what had been observed, and coding of entries (emphasizing importance) (Gertz, 1973). Spatial and interaction maps were also used to assist with the writing up of the findings (Merriam, 1998).

Data analysis for the in-depth interviews and participant observations was based on content analysis to identify major patterns, themes or major ideas in the text (Trochim, 2006). This paper used the logic of analytic instead of enumerative induction. For comparison across cases, the study used analytic comparison, and used the method of agreement and differences among a small set of cases discussed intensively. For validity, this research used the criteria for validity of qualitative research including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba and Lincoln quoted in Trochim, 2006). The researchers assured credibility of this research by verifying amongst interviewee responses and observations. In terms of transferability, the results of this research can be tested in other settings of public enterprises. The research enhanced transferability by being thorough in descriptions (Trochim, 2006). In terms of dependability, the researcher’s ensured to describe changes well and explain how these changes affected the way the research was done.

*Limitations*

Multiple case study research is extremely time consuming and expensive to undertake (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Given this study’s research is largely based on utilising in-depth interviews and to a lesser extent on the lead researchers’ participant-observations, personal bias and subjective opinions may exist and may have affected data collection, analysis as well as the interpretation of findings of the study. Also, participants (even though they were given the option to participate or withdraw from the study at any time) may have felt pressured to participate and may not have been completely open and honest, given the CEO in both the enterprises was the servant leader. Finally, there may be other factors than the ones highlighted that can inﬂuence servant leadership (Peterson *et al*., 2012). Nonetheless, the ﬁndings of this research are timely, and will help advance the work on servant leadership in the public sector in practise.

**Background**

The Fiji Islands Maritime Safety Administration (FIMSA) came into existence (as a government agency) in 1999 (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2008), was mandated to undergo reform, was led by self-serving bureaucratic directors that inculcated bureaucratic practices in the staff. A CEO was appointed in 2011, who practiced servant leadership. However, considering the ongoing underperformance of FIMSA, the agency was wound up in 2011. This led to the establishment of (and replacement of FIMSA by) the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF), a commercial statutory authority with a much wider set of responsibilities and a mandate to operate with a customer-centric service strategy (Slack and Singh, 2015). The CEO of FIMSA was being reappointed as the CEO of MSAF. These two government entities, while both mandated to undergo reform, were unique in that their length of existence, guiding legislation, responsibilities, reporting lines, leadership, structure, staffing, culture and ethical climate were markedly different. It is the uniqueness of the two entities, and yet the commonality of the servant leader CEO, which interested the researchers sufficiently to investigate how these differing circumstances would affect the outcomes of servant leadership.

**Findings and interpretation**

*Discussion of responses to questions*

*RQ1.* How do employees describe their servant leadership experience?

Employees expressed their experiences in relation to servant leadership and the impact of servant leadership. Some responses harmonised well within and across both enterprises. Considering the predominance of Christian employees in both enterprises, an overriding response was servant leadership had a biblical origin and should be the way all Christians lived and worked. Employees of both enterprises quoted the CEO as having stated on numerous occasions, “…the need to lead by example…” and “…to treat people the way you expect to be treated yourself.” Both sets of employees also responded they had evidenced the CEO lead by example (“helped us especially when things went wrong”, “unquestionable commitment” and “high moral and ethical standards at all times”), and continuously treated employees the way he expected to be treated by them. Employees from both enterprises highlighted the CEO viewed the organisation as an “inverted pyramid”, with his primary function being, to provide support to all employees…in effect humbling himself, working alongside employees, and acting as a servant to all employees, to facilitate enhanced individual and organisational ‘health’ and performance.

*RQ2.* How do employees’ servant leadership experiences vary from prior leadership experiences?

Employees of both enterprises indicated they had leadership experiences at other organisations that contrasted with servant leadership, and what they experienced with servant leadership was unique. Long serving employees of FIMSA and MSAF (in excess of 10 years continuous public service employment) commented they were “confused” and “suspicious” of the CEO’s leadership style (servant leadership) because it was “so different from the leadership we had previously experienced (autocratic leadership of the government).” Employees also commented the CEO’s leadership style (servant leadership) may not be sustainable on a day-to-day basis due to daily pressures and stress, therein “forcing the CEO to use the same type of leadership (autocratic leadership) like our previous Directors.” In contrast, newly recruited MSAF employees (less than 3 years employment with MSAF) indicated, “The CEO has a different way of leading”; and “He does not direct us and is not aggressive like our other bosses.”

*RQ3.* How do employees perceive the servant leadership traits experienced?

Employees of both enterprises indicated their desire that leaders consistently ‘lived’ their leadership traits. Nonetheless, FIMSA employees while having indicated limited understanding and experience of and interest in the leadership traits of servant leadership, confirmed their preference for the ‘known’ autocratic leadership character traits as opposed to servant leadership. In contrast, some MSAF employees appeared to have a better understanding of and interest in the leadership traits of servant leadership. The most common responses from MSAF employees in terms of servant leadership traits experienced were leading by example, unquestionable honesty and integrity, compassion and humbleness.

*RQ4.* How do employees perceive the leader-follower behaviour experienced?

The common response from most FIMSA employees was employees would not voluntarily follow the CEO (servant leader), nor mimic the leaders’ behaviours, considering the leadership style adopted by the CEO (servant leadership) was foreign to employees. FIMSA employees questioned servant leaderships’ effectiveness and personally expressed distrust in the CEO as he had only recently joined the organisation. Long-serving MSAF employees reiterated the sentiments of the other FIMSA employees. While literature confirms a positive correlation between servant leadership and leadership trust (Joseph and Winston, 2005) and development of organisational commitment (Goh and Zhen-Jie, 2014), this study reports suspicion, particularly from long serving employees with years of public sector experience. However, in contrast, some MSAF employees expressed the CEO provided direction, autonomy and hope (that had been previously lacking) and engaged and inspired employees through his commitment, integrity and desire to serve and support the employees. While no MSAF employees stated openly they were followers of their servant leader, observed employee behaviours that mimicked the servant leader suggested some MSAF employees did become followers.

*RQ5.* How do employees perceive servant leadership influenced the outcomes of the public enterprises?

Responses from FIMSA employees were highly negative towards servant leadership and any possible outcomes. FIMSA employees identified the negative aspects of servant leadership and commented, servant leadership “was foreign and confusing for management and staff”; they “did not trust it (servant leadership) or the CEO (servant leader)”; “…it (servant leadership) would unite management and staff against the CEO (servant leader)”, and “…it (servant leadership) would not lead to any positive outcomes.” Not surprisingly, there was no noticeable evidence of FIMSA employees becoming servants, reform of FIMSA did not proceed, and no performance improvements eventuated. In contrast, some MSAF employees’ comments suggested a more moderate perception of servant leadership. A number of ‘perceived’ followers suggested positive outcomes such as: “Initially we were confused, but with time, came to better understand it (servant leadership)”; and, “The CEO (servant leader), with involvement of management and staff, developed a shared vision (through strategic planning) we followed.” Greenleaf’s (1970, 1977) servant leadership philosophy of followers also embracing a ‘serving-others’ orientation when leaders do so, does not hold true with FIMSA employees, but does so, for some MSAF employees. In addition, while many servant leadership studies suggest servant leaders promote more contented, better-performing followers (Carter and Baghurst, 2013) with positive organisational outcomes (Liden *et al*., 2014), this study’s findings report mixed results – no performance improvement at FIMSA, but positive outcomes perceived by some MSAF employees.

*RQ6.* How do employees perceive servant leadership influenced the ethical climate of the public enterprises?

Employees of FIMSA confirmed their incentive to remain honest was negligible, considering questionable patron-client relationships were deeply ingrained, and those who resisted corrupt practices lacked protection. Many FIMSA employees stated servant leadership would be ineffective against such an inculcated, organisational ethical climate. Comments from MSAF employees were mixed. The long-serving MSAF public servants stated the inevitability of the existing organisational ethical climate persisting, and their perception that servant leadership would be useless in changing the ethical climate. The more recently recruited MSAF employees expressed optimistic comments relating to the CEO having implemented and trained employees in an ethics code of conduct to reinforce ethical behaviour; and confirmed they were encouraged by an improvement in the ethical behaviour of MSAF employees that had led to enhanced public confidence in MSAF.

*RQ7.* How do employees perceive servant leadership influenced reform of the public enterprises?

The FIMSA employees and the longer serving MSAF employees questioned whether servant leadership would be effective during reforms, and whether servant leadership would be effective in developing a shared vision (suggested to be necessary in successfully undertaking public sector reforms) (Rahman *et al*., 2013). A commonality of both the FMISA and MSAF longer-serving employees was the institutionalised thinking and comments that only an autocratic leadership approach would be effective during reforms. Other MSAF employees’ comments referenced that under the leadership of the CEO (servant leader), wide-ranging and extensive reform and performance improvements of MSAF did occur. In contrast, reform of FIMSA did not proceed and no performance improvements eventuated, either with an autocratic or servant leader.

*Discussion of emergent themes*

Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the data:

*Theme One: Servant leadership experience*

The servant leader experience at the individual employee level of both public enterprises was the foundational theme of this research. Findings suggest employees of FIMSA and long-serving public-sector employees of MSAF were institutionalised into believing the only effective leadership style was an autocratic leadership style (‘the known’); hence employees were generally confused with and not supportive of the servant leadership approach adopted by the CEO. This finding is understandable also considering FIMSA employees’ average length of public sector service was 16 years, and with the winding up of FIMSA and the establishment of MSAF, job security was of major concern to FIMSA employees. Findings also indicate newly recruited MSAF employees were more receptive to the servant leadership style adopted by the CEO and some did become followers. Employees of both enterprises indicated they had leadership experiences at other organisations that contrasted with servant leadership and what they experienced with servant leadership was unique.

*Theme two: Servant leadership application and traits*

Employees from both enterprises indicated their desire that leaders consistently ‘lived’ their leadership traits, as inconsistent leadership lead to lack of trust, confusion and disunity. Nonetheless, employees of both enterprises confirmed the CEO consistently demonstrated servant leadership traits, with the most common traits being: leading by example, unquestionable honesty and integrity, and compassion and humbleness. FIMSA employees generally expressed a lack of understanding and interest in servant leadership, while some MSAF employees appeared to be better informed and more interested in understanding servant leadership. Servant leadership traits demonstrated by perceived followers included shared vision, empowerment, delegation, and open communication. Previous research highlights the importance of ethical leaders consistently ‘walking-the-talk’ in behaviour and decision making (Brown and Trevino, 2006), therein motivating followers to emulate the leader (De Schrijver *et al*., 2010). There is no denying the fact that ethics is at the core of servant leadership, because there is more emphasis on integrity and trustworthiness (van Diierendonck, 2011)

*Theme three: Impact of servant leadership*

Past studies mention that with servant leadership the trust element is nurtured by the servant leader in an open organisational climate, creating a helping culture and positively inﬂuencing team support towards innovation (Ebener and O’Connell, 2010; Hu and Liden, 2011),. From this study, it is suggested the impact of servant leadership is contingent upon the pre-existing organisational characteristics such as values, culture, practices and employee attitudes (Russel and Stone, 2002). This study’s finding reveal employees of both enterprises were greatly hampered by pre-existing, highly institutionalised, hierarchical and bureaucratic organisational characteristics, ethical climate, and employee attitudes. In effect, for servant leadership to have the desired impact on both enterprises and their reforms, it is suggested employees’ attitudes needed to change, enabling employees to voluntarily follow, institutionalise and embed the servant leader behaviours, therein displacing the old behaviours (Edmondson *et al*., 2001). Findings indicate employee attitudinal and motivational change did not occur with FIMSA employees or with the long-serving public-sector employees of MSAF but did occur with the new recruits of MSAF, resulting in some perceived followers.

*Theme four: Servant leadership and organisational ethical climate*

Servant leadership adopted by the CEO reinforced ethical behaviour by encouraging morally-centered leadership, more than the other leadership styles (Giampetro-Meyer et al., 1998) previously experienced by the employees. Notwithstanding, FIMSA employees and the long-serving MSAF public servant employees overwhelmingly stated the servant leadership style adopted by the CEO was in direct conflict with the previously ‘known’ and accepted leadership styles and organisational ethical climate, and servant leadership would be useless in stemming the entrenched ethical climate. More recently recruited MSAF employees noted, servant leadership by the CEO was effective in promoting an appropriate ethical climate, therein establishing public confidence in MSAF. Here again, this study does not fully concur with Schaubroeck *et al*. (2011), who highlight servant leaders are in a position to shape organisational norms and values, that explicitly indicate and guide the moral behaviour of all, therein improving the ethical culture of modern companies. This study indicates the longer serving employees with more years of experience in the public sector were not at all confident in servant leadership rooting out unethical employee behaviour. It is suggested the ethics code of conduct (implemented by the CEO to regulate conduct) may have been insufficient to achieve comprehensive change in the ethical climate, considering success of codes are culture dependent (Ethics Resource Center, 2005), and reliance on regulation (without other supporting processes), is likely to be inadequate (Eisenbeiss, 2012).

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to servant leadership and public sector literature and practice by exploring servant leadership in an under-researched, public sector organisational setting, and provide important insights. Our findings revealed that despite the CEO common to both enterprises having orientated the employees of both enterprises to the characteristics and typical outcomes of servant leadership, and having consistently ‘lived’ servant leadership, pre-existing conditions of both enterprises, and lack of employee familiarity with servant leadership, resulted in different levels of employee acceptance of servant leadership of both enterprises, which affected employee engagement, organisational ethical climate, and public sector reform.

More specifically, FIMSA had been in existence for 12 years, was a highly bureaucratic, underperforming public enterprise, with historically autocratically led, indoctrinated, long-serving public sector employees, and an inculcated self-serving ethical climate, with employees not familiar with servant leadership, and not committed to the change efforts. Against the backdrop of these pre-existing conditions and lack of employee familiarity with servant leadership, the reaction of FIMSA employees to servant leadership was discomfort with; lack of trust, interest and support of; and an absence of motivation to institutionalise and embed the servant leader behaviours. The net result was an absolute lack of employee engagement, continuation of the self-serving ethical climate, with no reform evident, and the enterprise being wound up by the government.

In comparison, MSAF had only been in existence for 2-3 years, was a less bureaucratic, servant leadership led, performing public enterprise, with some indoctrinated, long-serving public sector employees and many newly recruited employees from a commercial background. This mix of employees provided a dual ethical climate: those self-serving and others customer centric. While all employees confirmed their lack of familiarity with servant leadership, some were motivated to institutionalise and embed the servant leader behaviours, and were committed to change efforts. The net result was a groundswell of employee engagement, continuation of the self-serving ethical climate by long-serving public sector employees and a rejection of this climate by newly recruited employees, and significant reform (revision of all maritime legislation, restructuring of the enterprise, enhanced service delivery, and international recognition).

Previous studies infer that it is a given that servant leadership is considered a natural model in the public sector, because leaders in public organisations are thought to have stronger intentions to serve in comparison to leaders who lead private organisations (Gabris & Simo, 1995). Also, literature infers that servant leaders promote positive employee engagement, more contented and better-performing followers (Carter and Baghurst, 2013), and foster perceptions of an ethical climate (Burton *et al.,* 2017), resulting in positive organisational outcomes (Liden *et al*., 2014) that enable organisations to establish and maintain a competitive advantage. What this study identified was that servant leadership was not a natural model in the public sector and was viewed as foreign, all public sector leaders did not have strong intentions to serve, the expected outcomes of servant leadership were not necessarily guaranteed, and that pre-existing conditions of an enterprise, and lack of employee familiarity with servant leadership, significantly affected employee acceptance of servant leadership, employee engagement, organisational ethical climate, and public sector reform. Additionally, it was not necessarily leadership style alone that could bring about favourable outcomes. Obviously, a myriad of other factors beyond the scope of this research were also at play and need to be considered.

Given this study does not fully concur with the past studies in certain areas, and the outcomes of servant leadership were markedly different for both enterprises studied, we agree with Hunter *et al*. (2013) that we have only just begun to understand the servant leadership style, and there are still many questions that remain unanswered (Zou *et al*., 2015). We thus reiterate the Peterson *et al.* (2012) argument - literature is yet to fully establish the relationship between leadership style and organisational performance.

***Future Research***

Continuing on from this study, it would be interesting to further examine: public sector organisational outcomes of servant leadership in a variety of public sector organisational settings; the effect of organisational and employee background, and the implementation of servant leadership, on public sector reform; the correlations between servant leadership and public sector employee engagement, ethical climate, and public sector reform; and the antecedents of servant leadership development; in order to reinforce servant leadership as a viable leadership theory that aids public sector organisations and enhances the well-being of its followers (Parris and Peachey, 2012).

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