

# Tertiary servant leader development in Aotearoa-New Zealand

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## Abstract

Numerous courses have sought to develop servant leaders, but few have focused on servant leadership within a New Zealand tertiary education context. This article explores how servant leaders were developed in a course in Aotearoa-New Zealand using the Sendjaya, Sarros and Santora (2008) dimensions of servant leadership. The article also considers how Māori education concepts may support servant leader development in a New Zealand context. Results suggest most learners developed in some servant leadership dimensions with development influenced by experiential learning beyond the classroom. Further post-course and quantitative research is recommended to expand these findings by measuring the extent of servant leader development.

## 1. Introduction

Servant leadership was first proposed by Robert Greenleaf as a remedy to poor institutional leadership - including that in the church. Greenleaf drew on Christian leadership ideals to argue that servant leaders must create followers who are “healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants” (1970, p. 6). Though his concept was a good litmus test of servant leadership, Greenleaf did not adequately define servant leadership or provide a good measure to identify servant leaders. Eva et al. (2018) since offered the sine qua non of servant leadership as being “an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2)

manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community". This captures the essence of servant leadership, emphasising Greenleaf's service above personal needs and the influence of servant leaders on others.

In the decades since, academic interest in this concept has proliferated with one recent literature review identifying 270 articles in the period between 1998 and 2018 (Eva et al., 2018). Growing interest in servant leadership by academics is not unmerited as servant leadership has been associated with around 60 of Fortune Magazine's top 100 companies to work for (Lichtenwalner, 2010), including six of the top ten. Furthermore, servant leadership was found to be conceptually distinct from other leadership theories with positive impacts in behavioural, performance, leader-related and attitudinal outcomes (Eva et al., 2018). Servant leadership has also been linked with Christian leadership, ministry and theology (Foster, 2014; Russell, 2003), though Niewold (2006) argued servant and Christian leadership are not synonymous and servant leadership presents an incomplete picture of the leadership of Christ.

Despite the growth in academic literature on servant leadership, there have been few studies exploring the development of servant leaders in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Section two analyses servant leader development literature and the unique context of tertiary education in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Section three discusses the design and development of a servant leader course derived from the Servant Leadership Behaviour Survey (SLBS) dimensions and incorporating Māori education concepts. Section four reviews how servant leader development occurred with support from Māori education concepts and in the six dimensions of the SLBS. Sections five and six discuss results and the study limitations and conclusions.

## **2. Servant leader development**

Despite growing interest in servant leadership, there is no unanimity about the process for developing servant leaders. Greenleaf believed it to be a philosophy that developed and emerged through personal reflection (Parris et al., 2013) that could last a lifetime (Grunwell, 2015) rather than a "scholarly treatise or a how-to-do-it manual" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 49). Furthermore, Sipe and Frick (2009) warned against reducing it to a methodology – suggesting servant leader development may not easily translate

to formal tertiary education. Yet, numerous studies have explored servant leadership development in tertiary education. Of these, the courses evaluated by Cress et al. (2001), Marshall (2008), Anderson (2009), Bommarito (2012), Noll (2012), Rohm (2013) and Meinecke (2014) have shown some degree of successful servant leader development. Griffin (2012) and Ashley (2016) also found servant leader development could occur within church or ministry contexts. However, all this research is characterised by small sample sizes and situated in the United States. Cyril (2006) studied servant leader development in Aotearoa-New Zealand within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – documenting servant leader development in both Aotearoa-New Zealand and ministry contexts. Cyril (2006) also incorporated Māori concepts in her analogy of servant leader development as like a growing tree. This present research sought to further explore servant leader development in an Aotearoa-New Zealand context considering the recent developments in the servant leader field.

### **3. Development of The Servant as Leader course**

The ‘College’ where this study occurred was a New Zealand-based international college offering programs in business, management, ministry, teacher-training, language, technology and digital media. Despite being owned by a church, the College sought to serve a religiously and ethnically diverse student and staff body. Senior management sought to reflect the Christian and New Zealand heritage by integrating principles from servant leadership and *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*<sup>1</sup> in *The Servant as Leader* course.

### **Servant Leadership Behavioural Survey (SLBS)**

In line with the College’s Christian heritage, the SLBS was used as the servant leadership framework as it included the dimension ‘transcendental spirituality’. The SLBS was developed as a servant leadership measure by Sendjaya, Sarros and Santora (2008) and has since been rigorously tested and compared well against other servant leadership measures and frameworks (Eva et al., 2018). Other servant leadership dimensions in the SLBS framework are voluntary subordination, transforming influence, covenantal relationships, responsible morality and authentic self;

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<sup>1</sup> The Treaty of Waitangi is the bilateral partnership between Māori chiefs and the British Crown and is widely recognised as the founding document of Aotearoa-New Zealand.

encompassing moral, personal, emotional, relational, conceptual and spiritual development (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Research found the SLBS was Research by Eva (2009) and later with Sendjaya (2013) in secondary Australian schools recommended strategies for developing servant leaders using the SLBS dimensions and prioritised the importance of individual dimensions in servant leader development. This present study applied the SLBS to servant leader development in a new context – namely within Aotearoa-New Zealand and in tertiary education – to understand how servant leaders developed in all the SLBS dimensions.

### **Teaching and learning concepts: A Māori worldview**

Since the 1980's, there has been growing recognition within New Zealand society and government of the need to incorporate Māori culture in tertiary education (Pihama et al., 2004). This recognition is based in *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* and the more recent Education Act (Education Act, 1989). Approaches to incorporate Māori culture in tertiary education have ranged from establishing *wānanga* (Māori tertiary institutes) to incorporating Māori standards and requirements within tertiary qualifications. As the College targeted an international student body not eligible to study in a *wānanga* and without *te reo Māori* (Māori language), learners had limited opportunities to engage with Māori culture in a formal education setting.

The alternate option was to incorporate Māori concepts in the classroom. A central theme that emerged in the related literature review was the importance of *āko*; the educative process of creating, conceptualising, transmitting and articulating Māori knowledge (Pihama et al., 2004). *Āko* translates to both teaching and learning – pointing to a communal and reciprocal learning informed by evidence, experience and reflection. *Āko* requires that in the learning community, each person (both teachers and students) should contribute to the learning and development of others (Keown et al., 2005) – positioning the teacher as a knowledge facilitator and community builder. Though *āko*, in its fullest extent, is entwined in the Māori lived experience and worldview (Pere, 1994), principles of *āko* were applied through collaborative and reciprocal learning in this course in that each learner contributed to class discussions and informed the learning of others. From this perspective, application of *āko* as a learning concept complemented the servant leadership principles of listening, building community and having a commitment to the growth of others (Spears, 1995).

Another recurring theme in literature on Māori education was the importance of the whakapapa. A whakapapa is the “genealogical descent of all living things from the gods to the present time” (Barlow, 2016, p. 173). By reciting their whakapapa, Māori learners culturally locate themselves within Māori society and the Māori worldview. Closely linked with the whakapapa is the waiata (song), pūrākau (stories) and whaikōrero (proverbs) which draw from personal connections, relationships and experiences shared to co-create knowledge and form the basis of the adult learner worldview (Pihama et al., 2004). The course introduced learners to the concept of a whakapapa and incorporated a Māori perspective in each lesson through a relevant waiata, pūrākau and whaikōrero. These components were facilitated by a Māori academic staff member or through a Māori learner who joined late in the course.

### **Participant acceptance and course approval**

The course was advertised to College postgraduate management students as an extra-curricular course without credit or academic recognition. Learners were asked to commit to a weekly face-to-face lesson lasting two-hours supplemented by online delivery where learners undertook self-study, reflection and preparation of a servant leadership framework. Due to limited interest from students, four College staff who expressed interest in *The Servant as Leader* course were also accepted.

The final course design was reviewed through two panels – one focused on knowledge of Māori culture and the other on servant leadership. These panels were composed of recognised experts in their field from the Auckland region (for the Māori panel) and Australia (for the servant leadership panel). Both panels were given a draft literature review and proposed course design for review and asked to critique the course design. Recommendations were incorporated into the course design including that the course was voluntary and not recognised in any College qualification.

### **Evidence collection and analysis**

The evidence collected was qualitative with the principal evidence being from semi-structured interviews undertaken at the course beginning, middle and end. This was further supported by learner reflections, class discussions, learner presentations and a focus group with learners who undertook a related service project. Evidence was coded, categorised, compared and tagged based on the SLBS dimensions and

thematically as key ideas emerged. The SLBS was not included as evidence in the study.

#### **4. Outcomes from The Servant as Leader course**

This section explores how development occurred as related by learners against the six dimensions of the SLBS. Eleven of the twelve learners believed they developed as servant leaders in one or more of the servant leader dimensions by the middle of the course – generally authentic self, covenantal relationship and transcendental spirituality, as these topics were specifically explored. Most learners believed this development continued and further developed in responsible morality, voluntary subordination and transforming influence by the course end. The only learner who did not believe he developed as a servant leader during the course – George, stated he already exhibited all the dimensions of servant leadership, but felt the course helped consolidate his leadership understanding, philosophy, style and techniques and intended to share his thoughts of servant leadership in a memoir.

#### **Development of voluntary subordination**

Some learners believed they developed in their voluntary subordination during the course by exploring and reflecting on service and community and social development. Leon and Tina, for example, previously volunteered in community development projects in Brazil and reflected on these past experiences. Leon shared how:

“[Staff in the community development project previously] said “it will take you a year to understand what has happened...” Six months after, something crossed my mind, and I was like ‘oh - that’s what it is’... Things happen with time - they [do not] happen at the same velocity as events” (28/8/18, 80).

As Leon and Tina shared their experiences with the class, several peers were inspired through reciprocal learning. Jennifer shared how:

“Tina and Leon inspired me [to volunteer with the Salvation Army] and I’ve been telling my friends. What they did and their passion to help was really amazing” (28/8/18, 207-208).

Jennifer also volunteered with other community and church groups. Other learners created a learner-led community development project. While voluntary subordination developed in learners, it often developed outside of the classroom through guided reflection, community involvement and volunteering.

## **Development of authentic self**

Development of authentic self was evident in most learners as they explored and reflected on concepts of humility, authenticity, accountability and security and vulnerability. Victor found:

“I’ve accelerated my growth and wisdom since doing the course... [Previously] I didn’t want to be rejected and I didn’t want people to know that I knew very little in an area. I didn’t want them to know that about me and I didn’t want to put myself out there and them decide I didn’t know much at all” (3/9/18, 48).

Frank also shared how the experience of living and studying in Aotearoa-New Zealand made him reflect on his sense of identity:

“In my country, I have status. I have [a] car, I go to [certain] places and I’m surrounded by [certain] people. I felt secure” (28/8/18, 40).

As a result, he was challenged to emotionally and mentally:

“...move outside of my comfort zone. Sometimes people look at you because you have status. I started now from zero and no one knows who you are or where you came from and feeling like someone else” (28/8/18, 40).

Aimee also shared how:

“Going through the course I became more comfortable with the vulnerability of being a servant. You become effective when people see that you are being real and being vulnerable” (28/8/18, 2).

Development of authentic self occurred through reflection and was often facilitated through past and present experiences that included community service and the challenges of international education.

## Development of transforming influence

Most learners sought to develop trusting and empowering relationships in their servant leader development by reflecting on how they could develop others. Although previously struggling to develop trust with her followers, Erika shared how she now is:

“trying to build a community and have created new values for the team... I have added team spirit, trust, cooperation and curiosity. I am a strong believer that these values are very important and when each member of the team understands it, they can add to [the community]” (28/8/18, 35).

Transforming influence was often contextual to the learner, with learners who were teachers relating servant leadership to a teaching environment. Lauren shared how:

“I’m talking a lot more [in class] about the ‘being’ of the teacher and the relationship of the teacher with the student... [I am] creating focus around engagement and trying to minimise the subject” (5/9/18, 44).

Leon also planned to develop others through formal training and Tina was in discussions with New Zealand Police to organise servant leader professional development.

On their own initiative, Aimee and Tina began mentoring others. Aimee mentored a previous work colleague and a classmate, and Tina mentored several young girls in her workplace. Aimee also coached some of her former church small group, finding:

“they just opened up... It turned out to be a really honest and deep conversation. I guess it’s something that I’ve never had before... What fulfils me is seeing people get out of their shell and maximise their potential. My vision in the long run is to do coaching” (AJ, 6/4/18, 13, 88).

In developing as servant leaders, most learners demonstrated transforming influence although this was often expressed outside the classroom.

## Development of covenantal relationship

Most learners noted development in their personal relationships during the course as they explored concepts of acceptance and availability, collaborating with others and



equality. Jennifer found her relationship with her daughter changed as she sought to authentically serve and become more transparent. Victor shared how:

“being in service helps my family develop this ethic of service because I’m modelling this to them. Even if I have to stay up late or wake up early... or give up on doing things that I like... so that I’m being and modelling selflessness. This has helped me resolve the tension between my family and work” (28/8/18, 14).

Yvette found the course challenged her self-identity as a leader. Previously, she was:

“put in a position where I had to lead people - that’s why I considered myself a leader at the time... [In the] course, [I found] it’s not so much having a position but being able to relate to people and being able to lead and influence people” (YM, 28/8/18, 178).

Aimee sought to move towards a coaching career as she became:

“more confident and comfortable... being vulnerable with other people... in my church or with people I’m coaching. I had this guard before preventing me sharing my real self and exposing my vulnerable side. Now I’m more confident and comfortable exploring deeper relationships because I’m more comfortable opening up myself” (28/8/18, 94).

Several learners also noted how collaboration developed during the course as they undertook a group project in another College course and worked in a team while applying principles of servant leadership.

While most learners believed their relationships developed, the nature of this development differed among different learners. Some learners focused on relationships with family and/or friends while others emphasised their team, workplace or church – suggesting learners perceived servant leadership as a holistic leadership concept not limited to vocational settings or the Christian faith.

### **Development of transcendental spirituality**

Most learners believed they developed spiritually as they reflected on their personal spirituality. For many, this was related with their faith. Rick shared how:

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“with this course, it really increased my spirituality and helping me to understand myself better and improve myself. So, for me to say that, assumes that God really listens and really advises - that’s more than just anything - that for me is gospel more than gospel...” (RL, 28/8/18, 199)

Development in some learners connected their faith with a sense of mission. Valerie shared how:

“I’m more aware now of what is happening [and that] my servant teaching is not just in church but is in everything. I understand I am influencing people more than I thought” (28/8/18, 98).

Though some learners were not religious, they still noted development in their spirituality. Lauren shared how:

“I think my self-confidence and efficacy have grown hugely since I’ve... [been a part of] the servant leadership course because it has enabled a lot of discussion and openness and lots of opportunities for awareness and how things are and how things can be. So, I think it’s really powerful and being in the class is just magic. It should be bottled” (12/4/18, 40).

As most learners initially identified with a religion (Catholicism, Buddhism, Mormonism or Protestant Christianity), development built on their faith as learners integrated the concepts of servant leadership with their religious context and beliefs.

### **Development of responsible morality**

It was difficult to determine the extent to which responsible morality developed. Learners reflected on their personal moral opinions about issues such as corruption, hypocrisy and exploitation of the poor during the course, but these opinions were consistent with earlier beliefs. The most prominent development was in attitudes towards social justice where Frank and Jennifer began taking ‘moral action’ by participating in community projects and desiring to volunteer after the course. This research would benefit from follow-up research to determine if this change in moral reasoning led to changes in moral action.

## Application of Māori teaching and learning concepts

Some learners believed the incorporation of Māori learning concepts and culture in the form of *whakapapa*, *waiata*, *pūrākau* and *whaikōrero* helped in understanding Māori culture, leadership and their Māori friends. Learners also found the concept of *āko* helped foster trust, openness, and deeper learning - as Lauren (who was a teacher) summarised:

“[what made the course powerful] was the people and their sharing and their openness. I’ve never experienced anything quite like that - ever... [Servant leadership and *āko*] brings out that caring and humanity, openness and trust. That trust was secure, safe [and] powerful” (6/9/18, 112-114).

A reason Rick joined the study was to learn about Māori culture to help his personal and professional development. He later synthesised Māori culture with his Filipino culture and personal experiences in what he called the ‘Bayan-iwi’ framework. For Rick, a servant leader is:

“a humble and flexible Datu (Filipino leader) to the iwi, a wise rangatira (Māori chief) that holds the Bahay organisation (Filipino community) together as defender and champion of its *Te Whare Tapa Wha* (Māori welfare). The servant leader is, neither absolute nor subordinate but respected” (14/6/18, 411).

Other learners also concluded their ethnic culture was like Māori culture or that Māori and servant leadership were synonymous. Although learners deeper appreciation for the Māori people, this attitude reflects a simplistic and ethno-centric approach that does not appreciate the cultural differences or nuances of Māori culture.

### 5. Discussion

Results echo earlier findings of Eva (2009) and others, that learners must apply or draw from servant leadership outside the classroom in order for the development to take place. Learner feedback on their development agreed with earlier research that volunteering (Bowen et al., 2009; Cress et al., 2001), service-learning (Marshall, 2008; Stewart, 2012; Yorio & Ye, 2012) or action learning (Robin & Sendjaya, 2019) may result in servant leader development. The findings are also consistent with Greenleaf’s assertion that servant leader development is reflective and occurs over time (1977).

However, as development often occurred through experiential learning outside the classroom in concert with other events, it was difficult to delineate what development was the direct result of the teaching. This study illustrated how a cycle of action-reflection learning may support servant leader development when there is a reflective space and theoretical frameworks underpinning the learning that encourage action/practice.

This study was the first to explore reciprocal learning through the Māori concept of *āko* as a philosophy to support servant leader development. This builds on earlier studies that found pedagogical tools emphasising interpersonal relationships such as mentoring and pairing (Ashley, 2016) supported servant leader development. This study also suggests covenantal relationships should be fostered in the classroom through learner-learner relationships and teacher-learner relationships. This may be facilitated through the facilitator being a 'servant teacher' (Hays, 2008) and modelling servant leadership in their personal classroom interactions.

Incorporating Māori learning concepts and culture in the classroom was largely beneficial. While learner awareness of Māori culture increased, care must be given to facilitating a deeper understanding of Māori culture as a unique concept distinct from servant leadership or their familiar culture. The limited development of learners in understanding Māori culture in this course points to a wider need for tertiary institutes with international learners to encourage Māori concepts and culture at a programme level.

Consistent with the earlier findings of Cyril (2006), most learners found their transcendental spirituality developed through their servant leader development. This was true for learners who identified as Mormon, Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist and agnostic – a contrast to earlier studies that sought to develop servant leaders in a particular religion or tradition (Ashley, 2016; Cyril, 2006; Griffin, 2012). These results suggest a relationship may exist more broadly between servant leader development and spiritual development – although the nature and strength of this relationship requires further research. While Eva (2009) suggested transcendental spirituality be replaced with a focus on understanding how learners are 'part of a bigger system', these findings suggest that transcendental spirituality – and potentially the sub-dimensions of 'religiousness', can be an important component in servant leader development. Furthermore, where Eva (2009) reported that transcendental spirituality

should not be taught because of differences between denominations and religions, this study found that servant leader development occurred regardless of the participants religious beliefs and these religious differences potentially helped in learners' servant leader development.

## 6. Limitations and Conclusion

Consideration must be given to the unique context of this study where most learners were international students and had a higher level of religious affiliation than would be expected in other New Zealand classrooms. Furthermore, without quantitative measures for servant leader development through the SLBS – or any other scale – it is difficult to determine the extent of development. Last, the exploration of only 12 learners limits the ability of the study to draw wider conclusions about the nature of servant leader development through this or similar courses.

As evidence grows of the positive outcomes of servant leadership, consideration must be given to how servant leaders can develop. This study explored servant leader development within tertiary education in Aotearoa-New Zealand supported by Māori teaching and learning concepts and found servant leadership dimensions developed in some learners. Findings from *The Servant as Leader* course suggest servant leadership dimensions can develop within the classroom as educators contextualise servant leader development to local cultures and customs.

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