

Understanding servant leadership dimensions

Servant leadership dimensions

Theoretical and empirical extensions in the Portuguese context

Mário Franco

Center for Advanced Studies in Management and Economics Research Center (CEFAGE-UBI), University of Beira Interior, Covilha, Portugal, and

Augusto Antunes

Department of Management, Polytechnic Institute of Viseu – Superior School of Management and Technology, Viseu, Portugal

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to identify and discuss the concept of servant leadership, find some dimensions and understand how staffs in organizations make sense of this style of leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – Multiple exploratory case studies in six Portuguese organizations/firms were performed. As data-collecting instruments, several interviews, direct observations made on-site and documentary analysis were used.

Findings – From thematic analysis, the authors found nine dimensions associated with servant leadership in the organizations/firms studied: empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, ethical behaviour, altruistic calling, wisdom or vision, organizational stewardship, family atmosphere and identification with the leader.

Practical implications – Based on these dimensions identified, the authors constructed an analytical framework for servant leadership. This study contributes to theoretical development by integrating the servant leadership literature and organizational behaviour literature and should help servant leadership gain legitimacy as an important and relevant leadership theory.

Originality/value – This study is innovative because contributes to knowledge about organizations that follow a servant style of leadership, and in so doing form consistent dimensions that can represent benchmarking for other organizational structures.

Keywords Spirituality, Dimensions, Practices, Servant leadership, Emotional, Ethical and moral values

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The world has become more complicated with the rapid change in the global economic environment, and new times require new dynamics and active leaders able to cope with fundamental questions (Stone *et al.*, 2014; Sheppard *et al.*, 2013). Implicit in this new environment is an alternative model of organizational leadership which goes beyond the traditional competences and organizational performance (results) used to measure the leader's effectiveness – emphasizing in this new orientation the moral, emotional and



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relational dimensions of leadership behaviour. [Ingram et al. \(2005\)](#) argue also that additional leadership concepts and developments are needed because current environments are changing rapidly in terms of increased complexity and greater demands for successful internal and external collaboration.

For [Steers et al. \(2012\)](#), an approach to frame leadership in the global context is to focus on the lasting competences and personal skills considered as characterizing global managers. Certain combinations of traits and skills are assumed to be common to all managers. For example, successful world leaders are characterized by showing complexity of knowledge, mental curiosity, honesty, modesty and personal resilience. Leaders possessing this set of competences and skills are considered to be prepared for effective management most places in the world.

In response to these recent challenges for leadership, an emerging stream of academic studies has focused on leadership types rooted in ethical, pro-social or people-centered behaviours, and in particular on servant leadership ([van Dierendonck, 2011](#); [Page and Wong, 2000](#); [Parris and Peachey, 2013](#)). Servant leadership is a promising leadership style for today's dynamic environments ([Eva et al., 2019](#)). In this situation, servant leadership provides a conceptual structure for the new dynamics now required for leadership.

Servant leadership is characterized by a focus on followers' growth and empowerment, and on leaders' altruism, empathy, sense of ethics and community stewardship ([Greenleaf, 1977](#); [Liden et al., 2008](#)). Servant leaders show behaviour typical of servant leadership as their functioning is guided towards the development of humanity – representing a very deep interest, perhaps spirituality. This is leadership that acts through influence and persuasion, rather than by restricting followers. [van Dierendonck and Nuijten \(2011\)](#) and [Eva et al. \(2019\)](#) also observed that the twenty-first century has witnessed great interest in leadership theories.

The conceptual and empirical literature points to servant leadership's strong potential to facilitate benefits to organizations ([Karatepe et al., 2019](#)). However, servant leadership, as the overarching term for the inclusion of ethical and moral aspects in leadership, has remained an underdeveloped field ([Ciulla, 2004](#); [Brohi et al., 2018](#); [Karatepe et al., 2019](#)). Only recently has leadership research once again turned its focus to the phenomenon of servant leadership in its different facets. Thus, many new approaches within leadership connect to ethical or moral themes. The literature shows a troublesome lack of consensus regarding dimensions/components that distinctly reflect servant leadership ([Grisaffe et al., 2016](#)) and, for [Eva et al. \(2019\)](#), there is a lack of coherence and clarity around the construct has impeded its theory development. Yet research on servant leadership is still in its infancy, and one of servant leadership theory's main tenets, that it fosters greater employee well-being, has received little attention in the literature ([Donia et al., 2016](#)).

The literature on servant leadership is still ambiguous and undetermined ([Eva et al., 2019](#); [Karatepe et al., 2019](#)), and can be considered a mixture of leadership styles. However, there are sufficient developments in the literature to discern the attributes and characteristics of this type of leadership. Despite a growing stream of academic studies exploring positive outcomes of servant leadership practice, little is known empirically about its practices in organizations, particularly in the Portuguese context. Therefore, this study is based exclusively on Portugal, where the business sector is made up mostly of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (99.8 per cent), with a pronounced family tradition in their development, a greater distance from institutional power and a more collectivist orientation ([Van Dierendonck et al., 2017](#)).

As shown in the research made, only in recent years has greater attention been paid to this type of leadership in Portugal. In recent work by Prof. Milton Sousa in collaboration

with [Van Dierendonck et al. \(2017\)](#), servant leadership has been given greater prominence. It is noted that in Portugal, a country of 10 million inhabitants, this attention is of relative importance, and so transversal studies such as those by [van Dierendonck et al. \(2017\)](#) establish a wider view of the topic in the European Union (EU), to which the country belongs.

[Van Dierendonck et al. \(2017\)](#) also state that we live in a multicultural and diversified world, where globalization has become an organizational fact. The cultures of different countries are coming closer together as never before and this process is noted especially in Europe, where the EU has promoted increased economic interdependence and cultural exchange between member states. Therefore, this evidence calls for greater cultural sensitivity by leaders and also questions the leadership models in different countries belonging to the EU. Being based mainly on knowledge, European economies rely to a great extent on getting the best out of people. There is a need to pay more attention to employees – a critical factor in remaining competitive and achieving long-term success.

Similar to research on leader-member exchange (LMX) and transformational leadership, initial findings suggest that servant leadership is also evident in China. Using a translated version of [Liden et al. \(2008\)](#) servant leadership scale, [Hu and Liden \(2011\)](#) reported a mean of 4.93 among mainland Chinese bank employees compared to a mean of 4.67 among a sample of United States employees ([Liden et al., 2008](#)). Similarly, employing the same servant leadership scale, [Schaubroeck et al. \(2011\)](#) found no differences between US and Hong Kong employees of the same multinational bank. Also interesting was that servant leadership explained up to ten per cent of the incremental variance in individual and team outcomes in both the US and Chinese samples. Clearly, servant leadership has demonstrated great potential for leadership research in both China and the USA.

In this context, our main objective is to identify and understand how staff in organizations makes sense of servant leadership dimensions and practices. To achieve this goal, we adopt qualitative research (six Portuguese organizations) to examine the main dimensions and practices associated with servant leadership. Indeed, for [Stone et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Pekerti and Sendjaya \(2010\)](#), academic work in the field of servant leadership has been growing, with the concept continuing to gain attention in practice and new research can be expected in this area.

Therefore, one of the contributions of this study is to attempt to make important contributions to the literature on this type of leadership. It proposes to advance our knowledge of servant leadership both theoretically and empirically. This research also takes an innovative view of leadership, where in terms of the dimensions inherent to servant leadership, attributes considered decisive for organizations are shown and clarified.

Theoretical background

Servant leadership

[Greenleaf \(1977\)](#), in the opinion of [Spears \(1993\)](#) and [Stone et al. \(2014\)](#), is considered to have initiated the concept of servant leadership among modern organizational theorists. The theory is over 40 years old and has been rediscovered in recent years by academics ([van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011](#)). So for [Greenleaf \(1977\)](#), the servant-leader is the first to serve. This author describes servant leadership not as a management technique but a way of life, which starts with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first.

This relevance begins with the natural feeling that if someone wishes to lead, they should serve in the first place. This is a conscious choice that leads the person to aspire to leadership. For [Lopes \(2009\)](#), the leader is an element central of the organization. Not to be served, but to serve the organization. Servant leadership denotes a leader whose first

priority is to serve others, and to do so with an authentic selflessness that puts others' interests ahead of self-interests and even organizational interests (Greenleaf, 1977).

Servant leadership refers to the type of leadership that emphasizes "service" and puts the satisfaction of employees' needs in the first place (van Dierendonck, 2011), and this leadership can influence employees by serving and helping them develop their sense of service and behaviour (Liden *et al.*, 2008). By providing employees with role models and necessary guidance and training, servant leadership can pass on its characteristics of "service" to employees and help them grow into service-oriented employees (Greenleaf, 1977).

Panaccio *et al.* (2015) and Grisaffe *et al.* (2016) specify two unique features of servant leadership – serving first, and selflessly focussing on others' needs. Servant leadership's central premise is that servant leaders influence organizational outcomes by fostering followers' growth and well-being, specifically through the process of satisfying followers' needs (Liden *et al.*, 2008; Mayer, 2010).

Servant leadership refers to the style in which a leader serves others in the management process, helps subordinates to obtain development opportunities, trains subordinates to be excellent service providers, and finally benefits the organization (Greenleaf, 1977; Bande *et al.*, 2016; Eva *et al.*, 2019). For servant leaders, serving others is the top priority. They can provide career development guidance for employees, and have a positive impact on employees' work attitude, behaviour and performance (Panaccio *et al.*, 2015).

Servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977) thus appears particularly relevant in today's business world as it proposes that when leaders adopt behaviours which transcend their self-interest to serve the interests of all stakeholders, employees experience greater well-being, more positive attitudes, and as they themselves adopt a serving orientation similar to that of their leader, exhibit behaviours which are beneficial to the organization, its members and the greater community.

Servant leaders use that knowledge to actively try to satisfy their followers' needs to bring out the best in their followers and allow them to achieve their potential (Tang *et al.*, 2016). Servant leaders provide direction and challenging responsibilities, while offering empathy, emotional support, feedback and resources. Most importantly, servant leaders place satisfaction of followers' needs at the centre of their efforts, before their own needs, creating a climate in which followers feel important and empowered to do more and create more (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016). For Pless (2007), leadership is not about the status of a leader, but about those served. This has major implications for leadership. This author shows that leaders need to serve followers to achieve a common purpose and be able to recognize, respect and take care of others' needs.

To attain this goal, servant leaders must also be prepared to share decision-making in the organization, encourage the leadership potential of its members and respectfully listen to concerns. They must be able to recognize when trust in the organization is diminished and respond to constructive criticism. The moral conduct of executives is fundamental in creating a servant organization, gaining stakeholders' trust, demonstrating transparency, incentivizing and freely admitting both personal and organizational mistakes (Reed *et al.*, 2011).

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According to Liden *et al.* (2008), servant leadership is based on the premise that to bring out the best in their followers, leaders rely on individualized communication to understand individuals' potential skills, needs, wishes, goals and knowledge and the other unique

characteristics of each follower and their interests. In this way, leadership helps followers to achieve their potential.

Orientation towards own interests should not motivate servant leadership, but should rise to a higher level of motivation. The main objective of the servant leader is to favour and satisfy the needs of others (Karatepe *et al.*, 2019), i.e. this should be the principal form and motivation for leadership (Russell and Stone, 2002). Servant leaders develop people, helping them to strive for success, provide vision to gain the credibility and trust of followers and influence others. Here too, servant leadership is an important form of leadership between human and non-human entities and a clear reference opposing egoistic leadership (Gillet *et al.*, 2011).

The perspective of Farling *et al.* (1999) presents a concept of leadership based on the variables of vision, influence, credibility, trust and service – characteristics of servant leadership. These authors conclude that servant leaders find the source of their values in a spiritual basis.

More recently, Eva *et al.* (2019, p. 114) present a new definition of servant leadership when servant leadership is an:

- other-oriented approach to leadership;
- manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests; and
- outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community.

This definition has three features that make up the essence servant leadership, namely, its motive, mode and mindset. Eva *et al.*'s (2018) meta-analysis of existing literature shows that servant leadership could effectively stimulate employees' positive behaviours, such as organizational citizenship behaviour, innovative behaviour, helping behaviour and voice behaviour.

Taking the recent literature on the subject of servant leadership in China, a country in which like Portugal there is a great distance from power (Liden, 2012) and a strong tendency to collectivism (van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2017), according to Yan and Xiao (2016), it also serves as efficient leadership that not only has incomparable merits in predicting employees' attitudes and behaviour, but also corresponds to the aim of reforming the construction of a government oriented towards services in the People's Republic of China (RPC). Therefore, as addressed by Bao *et al.* (2018), with Chinese culture being based on hierarchies and a pronounced distance from power, people tend to accept and even expect that power is unequally distributed. For the authors, it will be difficult for followers to internalize their servant leaders' attributes of humility and altruism. Nevertheless, it is predicted that as China becomes more globalized and oriented towards a market economy, employees' personal values will also change.

Miao *et al.* (2014) state that in recent years the political elite in China has increasingly referred to administrative leadership as "service oriented", in support of central government's focus on constructing a harmonious society. These authors reiterate that wise leaders should develop and change their leadership style to motivate followers towards positive behaviour and attitude, to achieve higher performance.

Similarly, in Portugal, research into new, follower-oriented leadership emerges with the changes related to the current young generation in China, which increasingly appreciates facilitating leadership rather than being more oriented towards orders (for example, projecting innovative tasks and prioritizing individual needs). Indeed, making work meaningful and reinforcing their autonomy and empowerment. Cai *et al.* (2018) show that in

high-tech firms in the PRC, servant leadership has some influence on innovation, promoting meaningful work when autonomy is high.

For [Miao et al. \(2014\)](#), leadership models inspired in Confucius are sensitive to subordinates' needs, and strive to help them by acting altruistically and showing compassion and good will. Taoism promotes service to the general community, emphasizing humility, leading by example and enabling others – characteristics found in servant leaders. In the same line of thought, in the communist model instituted by the PRC's administration, it is expected in its ideological basis that communist leaders will place the collective interest before their own, and serve the people, clearly representing objectives that are also pursued by servant leadership. The authors demonstrate that servant leadership strongly reinforces affective commitment, inducing higher levels of organizational commitment.

Dimensions of servant leadership

For [van Dierendonck and Nuijten \(2011\)](#), it seems that from a theoretical point of view, one is inclined to include dozens of characteristics a leader needs to display to be called a servant leader. Servant leadership is a holistic leadership approach that engages followers in multiple dimensions, such that they are empowered to grow into what they are capable of becoming ([Eva et al., 2019](#)). With so many proposed dimensions, it is difficult to know what is truly different about servant leadership and what is merely similar to other existing leadership constructs and characterizations ([Bauer et al., 2019](#)).

Although the concept of servant leader was introduced in the 1970s in Greenleaf's seminal essays, it is only in the last decade that empirical studies have started to define this construct and develop psychometrically sound measures ([Ehrhart, 2004](#); [Liden et al., 2008](#); [van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011](#)).

The literature on servant leadership provides an inconsistent set of dimensions defining this construct ([Bauer et al., 2019](#)). Based on the interpretation of servant leadership, [Liden et al. \(2008\)](#) identify seven dimensions:

- (1) emotional healing;
- (2) empowering;
- (3) helping followers grow and succeed;
- (4) behaving ethically;
- (5) putting followers first;
- (6) creating value for the community; and
- (7) conceptual skills.

These seven dimensions can be combined to create a global index of servant leadership ([Hu and Liden, 2011](#)).

On the other hand, [Van Dierendonck \(2011, p. 1232\)](#) asserted also that, "six characteristics give a good review of servant leadership behaviour as experienced by followers". The six traits include empowering and developing people, expressing humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, stewardship and providing direction.

Also in [Barbuto and Wheeler \(2006\)](#), the authors indicate a refinement of servant leadership, proposing a model congregating five dimensions deriving from its distinctive characteristics: emotional healing, altruistic vocation, wisdom, persuasive mapping and organizational stewardship, which are presented empirically as distinct. The instrument developed by these researchers was designated "The Servant Leadership Questionnaire Items", and includes these five factors of servant leadership.

The study by [Barbuto and Wheeler \(2006\)](#) highlights the success of developing a multi-dimensional measure of servant leadership, and in validating this new measure, servant leadership was revealed to be a significant predictor of organizational commitment, community behaviour, citizenship, performance and satisfaction at work.

The research by [Cerff and Winston \(2006\)](#), [Dennis and Bocarnea \(2005\)](#) and [Pekerti and Sendjaya \(2010\)](#) confirms, in servant leadership, the existence of behaviours of modesty, social love, visionary spirit towards followers, trust and empowerment. In this framework, servant leaders are those who act with a focus on their followers, with these being their main concern, with organizational concerns as peripheral. The dimensions inherent to servant leadership are virtues, defined as a person's moral quality, or their general quality of goodness or moral excellence. This is a holistic and altruistic approach to leadership focused on the commitment to serve others.

In the study by [van Dierendonck and Nuijten \(2011\)](#), and through their servant leadership survey (SLS), the dimensions of empowerment, responsibility, remaining in the background, modesty, authenticity, courage, forgiveness and stewardship are duly highlighted as important aspects leading to the heart of the research on servant leadership theory. Nevertheless, the authors recognize there is still a long way to go before reaching a sustainable basis for the definition of the main dimensions of the theory.

[Table I](#) summarizes the dimensions listed by several authors, which are functional attributes, operational qualities repeated and observed in servant behavioural leadership by leaders in the workplace ([Russell and Stone, 2002](#)).

Method

Type of research approach

For [Patton \(1990\)](#), [Bryman \(2004\)](#) and [Gardner et al. \(2010\)](#), in the past three decades, a growing number of studies have used qualitative research methods. Qualitative methods have been gaining acceptance in the leadership research community ([Bryman et al., 1996](#); [Berson et al., 2001](#)). Given the research objective, we adopt qualitative research to examine the main dimensions and practices associated with servant leadership. In addition, a case study is a particular strategy for qualitative empirical research that allows in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context ([Eisenhardt, 1989](#); [Stake, 1995](#); [Yin, 2015](#)).

To fully understand the organizational phenomena associated with (servant) leadership and/or influence on organizations as well as their practices, researchers need to combine multiple perspectives and navigate multiple levels of analysis. In particular, a multiple holistic design is suitable ([Yin, 2015](#)), as several cases are to be analysed. Therefore, we used the case study as a research approach.

Case selection, context and key informants

Contrary to the sampling approaches typically adopted in quantitative research (e.g. random, stratified, or statistical sampling), cases are selected because they are particularly suitable for illuminating a phenomenon and for extending relationships and logic among variables, i.e. theoretical sampling ([Eisenhardt, 1989](#); [Graebner and Eisenhardt, 2004](#)). Thus, the organizational cases for the present study were selected by the convenience sample method ([Patton, 1990](#)). The task was to choose organizations that would have servant practices.

In Portugal, some cases of businesses associated with orientation towards servant practices to the community are reported in the national or local press. Exhaustive interviews and a great variety of sources led to identifying organizations that had servant leaders. These are not exclusively good firms to work in, but ones that strengthen employees'

Dimensions	Description	Author(s)
Emotional healing	The act of showing sensitivity to other people's concerns. Empathetic leaders and good listeners. Dealing with the emotional needs of organizational members	Dennis and Bocarnea (2005), Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden <i>et al.</i> (2008)
Creating value for the community	Showing a genuine concern about helping the community surrounding the organization to grow	Liden <i>et al.</i> (2008); Barbuto and Wheeler (2006);
Conceptual skills	Possessing adequate knowledge of the organization and tasks at hand so as to be able to effectively support the growth and well-being of organizational members	Liden <i>et al.</i> (2008); Ehrhart (2004)
Empowering	Giving responsibility to, incentivizing and facilitating others, immediate followers especially, providing followers with control to identify and solve organizational problems, and determine when and how to perform work tasks; Making people significant	Liden <i>et al.</i> (2008); Dennis and Bocarnea (2005), Ehrhart (2004); Sendiava <i>et al.</i> (2008)
Helping subordinates grow and succeed	Showing genuine concern for followers' career growth and development by providing support and mentoring	Liden <i>et al.</i> (2008); Ehrhart (2004); Sendiava <i>et al.</i> (2008)
Putting subordinates first	Manifesting through actions and words that satisfying the needs of followers is a top priority (especially immediate followers). Satisfying their needs at work is a priority (supervisors who follow this principle often interrupt their own work to help subordinates with problems they face in their duties)	Dennis and Bocarnea (2005), Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Ehrhart (2004); Liden <i>et al.</i> (2008)
Ethical behaviour	Interacting openly, fairly and honestly with organizational members	Ehrhart (2004); Liden <i>et al.</i> (2008)
Altruistic calling	Describes the wish of a leader who is deeply rooted in making a positive difference in others' lives. Philanthropic purpose	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006);
Wisdom or vision	Understood as a combination of awareness of the environment and anticipation of consequences	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); Liden <i>et al.</i> (2008)
Persuasive mapping	Persuasive leaders are skilled in mapping questions and conceiving greater possibilities and are convincing when articulating those opportunities	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006);
Organizational stewardship	Describes the extent to which leaders prepare the organization to make a positive contribution to society through development communities, programmes and organizational dissemination	Barbuto and Wheeler (2006);

Table I.

Dimensions of servant leadership

Source: Adapted from Russell and Stone (2002), Dennis and Bocarnea (2005), Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), Liden *et al.* (2008) and van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011)

capacities, show wisdom, vision and stewardship, and put followers' interests in first place, etc. This was only visible after completing the work and clearly experiencing it on visits to the firms, confirming these orientations *in loco*. The selection of the organizations was primarily determined by personal contacts with owner-managers and other collaborators/staff, to gain trustworthy information about the real situation of their leadership. The task was to choose organizations that would have servant practices. Based on these insights, we

made an exemplary selection of six organizations (cases) which reflect servant practices. In this regard, multiple-case studies typically provide a stronger base for theory building or explanation. Thus, a multiple-case study will allow the leadership researcher to analyse within each setting and across settings.

The task was to choose organizations according to the following criteria: greater access to respondents – better access to information, geographical location and orientation towards servant practices. Six Portuguese organizations/firms were therefore selected: Firm A (case 1), Firm B (case 2), Firm C (case 3), Firm D (case 4), Firm E (case 5) and Firm F (case 6). We think that these cases are valid, since most interviewees were organizations' employees – the followers.

Bearing in mind the high total number of people this research could target, a significant sample was sought. Contact was made with 14 informants, from top management to the lowest level of collaborator and at all hierarchical levels of the organizations involved (Table I). This set of organizational members maximized the differences in several dimensions that were considered particularly relevant to our study. We selected individuals that own shares in the firm and others that do not, since ownership is likely to affect the incentives and priorities of organizational members. Leaders were also interviewed to gain greater knowledge of their daily practices and reasons. Portuguese society is aware that this type of firm follows different leadership standards. For that reason, they are considered examples of good firms to work in and organizations that remain over time with recognized socio-economic value. In these organizations, top managers/owners, heads of human resource departments and operational collaborators (Table II), were approached and the focus was essentially on understanding the phenomenon through listening to 1-3 collaborators per organization.

Interviewee	Age	Academic qualifications	Functions performed
<i>Case 1 – Firm A</i>			
A1	71	Management course for executives	President of the Board of Management
A2	53	12th year	Logistics coordinator
<i>Case 2 – Firm B</i>			
B1	40	9th year	Head of Parts Section
B2	59	4th year	Manager/Owner
<i>Case 3 – Firm C</i>			
C1	46	Degree in Engineering	General Director
C2	54	Degree in Textile Engineering	Director of Quality and Innovation
C3	40	Degree in Human Resources	Director of Human Resources
<i>Case 4 – Firm D</i>			
D1	45	Technical-professional	Administrative
D2	57	12th year	Sales logistics
D3	40	Degree and Post-graduate courses	Head of Communication
<i>Case 5 – Firm E</i>			
E1	46	Degree in Law	Administrator
E2	44	Degree in Management and Social Development	Director of Human Resources
E3	43	9th year	Wrapping operator
<i>Case 6 – Firm F</i>			
F1	83	Primary Teacher Training course	President

Table II.
Informants'
characteristics

Data collection and analysis

Case study data often provide advantages in being able to integrate both objective and perceptual data (Yin, 2015; Woodside *et al.*, 2018). Interviews are often the primary data source in case studies (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). So, most of the data was collected from interviews, which were conducted in Portuguese using semi-structured questionnaires as a guide, i.e. interview protocol (Turner, 2010). This included questions about the organizations to obtain key figures and facts, the informants' characteristics, as well as the main dimensions and practices associated with servant leadership. The interviews were held from July to November 2016 and lasted on average 48 minutes each.

When we contacted the participants – firms where we knew their leadership, they did not know what they were really looking for. The aim was to find out what types of leadership existed and their main dimensions. The leaders interviewed (a small percentage of total interviews) did not know the orientations of their daily management practice in the academic context. It was the followers interviewed in the organizations studied who revealed the true practices and unquestionable virtues of servant leadership. Face-to-face and in an informal environment, without the presence of their leaders, followers revealed the practices reported in this study.

By using different data sources, researchers can triangulate, that is, adopt different angles from which to observe the same phenomenon (Stake, 2013), thus making their findings more convincing and accurate. Here, document analysis was also considered for data triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) and for greater construct validity (Yin, 2015). The documental analysis we performed embraced all types of documents provided by the organizations/firms or available in the public domain, such as the firm's website, annual reports and other documents.

Concerning data analysis, this study focuses on descriptive and exploratory approaches to identify the main dimensions and practices concerning servant leadership. Thus, a useful way to organize and document the data collected through multiple sources is the creation of a case study database (Kotlar and de Massis, 2013). To achieve this procedure, the interviews were transcribed, which was extremely useful during data analysis. It was thus possible to reproduce and re-analyse the collected data. The interview results were also combined with other documentary evidence to produce a detailed individual story report. Finally, the data were analysed using thematic analysis (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2010) and some dimensions/themes were identified.

Findings and discussion*Organizations' characteristics*

With reference to the above, the data reported in this study were based on six organizations/firms. Table III presents a profile of these cases. As shown, the sample is composed of organizations with some diversity within industry. All the firms were founded a considerable time ago, the majority (four of them) having been in business for more than 48 years.

Servant leadership practices/dimensions

This section aims to identify the main dimensions/practices/themes associated with servant leadership present in some Portuguese organizations. In fact, in our study we pursue a more qualitative approach to gain a richer understanding of the dimensions and practices associated with servant leadership named by the respondents. Thus, each dimension we studied will be completed through thematic analysis. More specifically, in relation to the dimensions inherent to servant leadership style perceived in this study, the following stand out:

Cases	Economic sector	Year of foundation	No. employees	Annual sales (Euros)	Juridical form
1	Drinks distribution	1991	80	6m	S Corporation
2	Agricultural Machinery	1985	23	5m	S Corporation
3	Women's clothing	1966	789	50,5m	S Corporation
4	Manufacture of access systems, safety and locking devices	1991	345	74,6m	S Corporation
5	Textiles for the home	1977	180	10m	Corporation
6	Technical College	1967	140	-	Private Institution of Social Solidarity

Table III.
Firms' characteristics

Empowerment. This dimension entails encouraging and facilitating others' ability to take on responsibilities and handle difficult situations in their own way (Liden *et al.*, 2008; Mayer, 2010). Servant leaders' dominant focus on others is likely to cultivate various extra-role behaviours (Marinova and Park, 2014).

In this respect, the Administrator of Firm C (case 3) confirms this strengthening of others' capacities to allow an increased role in the organization, i.e. the relevance that in these organizations people really do count:

[...] We do that in a more institutional way in the idea portal and people don't need to make a presentation at a meeting and write. From that idea portal, we select and thereafter have a discussion around the table, which isn't a very rigid proceeding so that people don't hold back [...], a lot of ideas are put into practice, very simple ideas that make a difference. So we incentivize people [...] (General Director, Administrator, Case 3).

Recent research in servant leadership theory suggests that this leadership's behaviours are associated with positive outcomes such as employees' enhanced organizational commitment, creativity, organizational citizenship behaviours (OCBs) and job performance (Liden *et al.*, 2008). Most importantly, servant leaders place satisfaction of followers' needs at the centre of their efforts, creating a climate in which followers feel important and empowered to do more and create more (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016).

Helping subordinates grow and succeed. Servant leaders help subordinates grow and succeed by demonstrating genuine interest in their career development and goals and giving subordinates the opportunities to enhance their skills. These ideas are also underlined in Firms A and C:

I've been loosening the ropes and developing others [...] the situation doesn't let us sit back and relax [...]. We value people so that they can perform their duties better [...] people aren't machines and they have their specificities (President, Case1).

Yes, the most specific example of what happens is the following: we have people with the 12th year working in the stores, where most of them after some time end up working in the offices. For them it's a complete change and it's very rare for someone to come to the office without coming from the store, we have people with that qualification and so we don't need to look from them elsewhere (Director of Quality and Innovation, Case 3).

Here, there is undeniable confirmation of showing genuine concern for followers' career growth and development by providing support and mentoring. This is in the same perspective as Liden *et al.* (2008) and Ehrhart (2004), where servant leadership denotes a leader whose first priority is to serve others, and to do so with an authentic selflessness that puts others' interests ahead of self-interests and even organizational interests (Greenleaf, 1977).

Putting subordinates first. This dimension is clearly found in the six organizations (cases) studied. Here, servant leaders are those who act with a focus on their followers, these being their main concern with organizational considerations taking second place:

When the distribution work is done well (the workers begin to deliver the barrels and boxes of beer very early) they go home earlier [...] there's also flexibility in performance [...] if they aren't happy, always demotivated and this is reflected in sales [...].

as mentioned by the logistics coordinator in Case 1. In fact, servant leaders put subordinates first. They demonstrate openly that they place subordinates' best interests and success ahead of their own. This empirical evidence also agrees with the statement of the interviewee in Firm B.

Yes, but I don't want anyone ill at ease. Especially mothers supporting their children, things to do with school for example [...] they are free to deal with these matters. I feel they're more productive if they don't have these problems. That way, they're at ease [...] it's very important. They end up compensating (President, Case 2).

As mentioned by [Barbuto and Wheeler \(2006\)](#), servant leadership was revealed to be a significant predictor of organizational commitment, community behaviour, citizenship, performance and satisfaction at work. So this dimension undoubtedly contributes to greater collaborator satisfaction and to increasing their commitment to the organization. Also in the view of [Stone et al. \(2014, p. 5\)](#):

[...] the servant leader is someone who focuses on their followers [...] servant leaders have no special affinity with the abstract corporation or organization, but instead, they value the people that form the organization.

In this context, it is found that Case 4:

[...] is aware of the enormous personal challenge involved in being a leader. Naturally, we don't always manage and so we constantly promote initiatives in favour of the personal and professional development of our directors and managers (Firm D's internal magazine, p. 4).

In his seminal essays, [Greenleaf \(1977\)](#) also describes servant leadership not as a management technique but a way of life, which starts with a "natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (p. 14). In this connection, the interviewee from Firm E also says:

There's no subservience and nor do we want it, but there is mutual respect, to the extent that all employees have Sr. Celso's mobile number and know they can call him to explain any matter they want (Delegated administrator, case 5).

In fact, servant leadership characterizes leaders who have a motivation to serve, and put the needs of others, outside and within the organization, above their own ([Panaccio et al., 2015](#)).

Ethical behaviour. [Greenleaf \(1977\)](#) argued that the final responsibility for developing organizational and institutional capacity to serve lies with top management. Not only should these people be self-motivated towards ethical leadership, by the wish to serve others in some way, but they should also be motivated to build and strengthen the community inside and outside the firm:

Sr. Celso takes enormous pleasure in receiving agents from all around the world. [...] so often the flags there are here, there's a flagpole ready for a different flag from the country that's visiting us [...]. (HR Director, case 5).

This evidence shows unmistakable open interaction, which is fair and honest with the others and agrees with [Ehrhart \(2004\)](#) and [Liden et al. \(2008\)](#):

This gave me training [...] it's part of who I am. What I like most is the work, I usually say that work keeps away a lot of bad habits [...]. Being loyal, dedicated [...]. I also write some things down and try to open these roads [...] helping others, [...] helping at the basis of solidarity [...] later I used that with the trainer – the pupil who knew more to help the others. I developed that process (General Director, Case 6).

In truth, servant leaders behave ethically in that they act and interact openly, fairly and honestly with others ([Chiniara and Bentein, 2016](#)).

Followers are more likely to behave ethically when their leader demonstrates ethical behaviour, attitudes and values. The adoption of ethical behaviour and attitudes from imitating the leader can contribute to reducing possible unadvisable behaviour at work. As is practised in organization (case) D:

[...] we try to create a climate of worthwhile, pleasant work, promoting the values of friendship and mutual help [...] ethics and honesty should be the basic rule for all collaborators' action.

In this connection, in case B, the Director of Human Resources also refers to the importance of ethics:

We encourage that a lot. That's the only way for firms to develop [...]. First, the firm grew up with me, I started here 13 years ago when we were about 200 people, and it's rewarding to see the firm grow and be part of that growth [...].

Here is the conclusion found in [Reed et al. \(2011\)](#), where the executives' moral conduct is fundamental in creating a servant organization, gaining stakeholders' trust, demonstrating transparency, at both the personal and organizational level, and also in [Bennis \(2004, p. 3\)](#), when stating "character is the key to leadership [...]". This dimension also considers the argument of [Brown and Trevino \(2006\)](#), that "*servant leadership can be an effective means to create an ethical organizational climate*".

Altruistic calling. According to [Farling et al. \(1999\)](#), servant leaders find the source of their values in a spiritual basis. This researcher includes implicit recognition of the role of the leader's self-awareness with a focus on the leader's vision, values and attitudes which are generally classified as altruistic love and hope/faith. In this connection, the leadership analysed in Firm D shows almost spiritual behaviour:

[...] Meanwhile, we'll go on fighting, with initiative, with our culture of teamwork, discipline, responsibility and demanding standards, and at the same time union and trust" (excerpt from the internal magazine of Firm D "Master Key", case 4).

Wisdom or vision. This dimension linked to servant leadership is understood as a combination of awareness of the environment and anticipation of consequences. To achieve this aim, the dimension of wisdom or vision agrees with the analysis by [Pless \(2007\)](#) whereby leaders should also be prepared to share decision-making power in the organization, encourage the leadership potential in their members and listen respectfully to existing concerns.

In this context, the following statement is observed:

In terms of support [...] firms are not only for the good times, but are also seen at bad moments. For example, in a situation of illness [...]. It happened to me, they collaborated [...] (I speak for myself [...] laughter) (Head of parts, Case 2).

Recent research in this area suggests that servant leadership behaviours are associated with positive outcomes such as enhanced employee commitment, creativity, organizational citizenship behaviours and job performance ([Liden et al., 2008](#)).

The HR Director (Case 3) also highlighted during her interview that:

Yes, we even have a programme called "teep in", where any employee can go and make their suggestions. It's a programme we have that we all share, and I can make a suggestion for the logistics department just as the logistics department can make a suggestion for the human resource department [...]. We encourage that a lot. That's how companies evolve [...] and it's rewarding to this firm's growth and I was part of that growth [...].

In addition, the interviewee from Firm E says:

Here, there's also a very personal relationship [...]. It's not just numbers, not at all, often I think that the numbers are in second place, sincerely (HR Director, Case 5).

Yes, great wisdom, great knowledge [...] held by the inspector, he must be one of these people who know a lot, have a lot of knowledge, not just knowledge, but great wisdom and great

common sense, [...] And he's a very human person. Like I say, he's someone extremely [...] he thinks a lot about others [...] (Social Worker, Case 6).

With these accounts, servant leadership is revealed as a significant predictor of organizational commitment, community behaviour, citizenship, performance and satisfaction at work, but also the visionary spirit analysed in [Barbuto and Wheeler \(2006\)](#) and [Liden et al. \(2008\)](#).

Organizational stewardship. This dimension describes to what extent leaders prepare the organization to make a positive contribution to society through communities for development, programmes and organizational dissemination. In the cases studied here, there is obvious affirmation of leaders' vision in seeking the organizations' distinctive contributions to the surrounding societies. Some empirical evidence highlights this situation:

I'm proud to say: "Look, that's done here in the factory". You should see, because the people outside here, nobody has any idea of what's done here, the quality of the work here and the nice things we make here [...]. We arrive here in the morning and we do gymnastics. We do aerobics, we do hydrogymnastics, outside working hours, at half past eight. We have the swimming pool for the weekends, if we want for our children, because the swimming pool is heated, for the little ones, for the family. They're always available (Wrapping operator, case 5).

Also in [Barbuto and Wheeler \(2006\)](#), the authors indicate refinement of servant leadership, proposing the existence of a model that includes organizational stewardship, which is clear in the following example – Case 6 where the organization implements real action in favour of society and its development.

Since 1989 our company has given great importance to the multi-faceted action it carries out [...] one of the dimensions of a wide-ranging project of social dynamics including, among other things, local development and regional balance [...] (the magazine of Organisation F, 2011).

In the same line, Firm D (case 4) confirms what is stated in this dimension by [van Dierendonck \(2011\)](#) in a clearly positive contribution to society through social policies with an undeniable incremental impact. As the head of communication in Firm D states:

[...] I'll give you an example that I think is an example of how our organisational culture functions: Third quarter, fourth quarter of 2008, the year 2009, sales falling by about 25 per cent, too many staff, what are we going to do? Usually, people are sent away, we didn't, we didn't do that, we were creative, [...]. We created policies that meant saving jobs. In fact, the Portuguese government created an incentive package to help, we applied for that help through training actions, a bank of working hours, people's polyvalence, people moving around. People that were in one line moved to another, we were creative and innovated so that the 350 people remained here [...], we got through that period and didn't get rid of a single person.

Family atmosphere. A new and innovative dimension about servant leadership was identified: Family atmosphere. Some examples found in the firms studied here serve as an illustration:

[...] Here in the firm we have conditions, besides the salary, which are good conditions, we have everything, we have doctors, we have daily assistance, we have nurses, we have the possibility of reconciling the timetable with the firm and the family. If we need to go somewhere with the children or something like that [...]. Ethics are also very important here [...] (Administrative employee, Case 4).

When the distribution work is done well (the employees begin very early to deliver the barrels and crates of beer) they go home earlier [...] there's flexibility in the performance too [...] if they're not happy, they're always demotivated and that's reflected in the sales. For example, we

open up and ask when the employee is worried about some family problem, health, [...] we are concerned about helping! Genuinely [...]. If they're not all right mentally, performance is lower (Logistics Coordinator, Case 1).

Also highlighted is the existence of permanent medical services[1], with family accompaniment, annual health check-ups, physiotherapy service to prevent occupational illnesses, health insurance, canteen and social area (Extract from Huf Portuguesa's internal newsletter, December 2006, p. 9).

Servant leadership provides leaders with great opportunities. For Stone *et al.* (2014), this recent leadership style puts the accent on other people, i.e. on those it should serve, unlike other styles that do not emphasize this focus so much. Van Dierendonck (2011, p. 1230) notes that "compared to other leadership styles where the ultimate goal is the well-being of the organization, a servant leader is genuinely concerned with serving followers".

Other factors contribute to this environment, and this is precisely one of them, each person in here knows that besides being their place of work, they also know it's the place where in difficulty, whether it's the family or anything else, they can find an answer to their problem [...] Yes, yes, they know how to forgive, but mind you, when we're speaking about negligence, you can be forgiven once [...]. Work is an extension of my life, I have my family life, I have my hobbies, I consider that work is significant (Director of Quality and Innovation, case 3).

[...] This firm, and I still say it's possible it's different from the others, in fact my colleague Miguel will focus on us being among the best companies to work in, and for good reason, the good practices, obviously. The mood of the place is like that, the managers follow a culture, which for me is excellent, they have integrity, a family concept, they're really honest people, and that lets us be part of that culture [...] (Clerical Officer, case 4).

Servant leaders are visionaries; they create high levels of trust, stand as models, show consideration for others, delegate responsibility, and empower and influence followers. These are complementary ideologies because both describe excellent forms of leadership.

Now what I want to say, the mood itself, I'd say more relaxed, informality, go and have a coffee [...] let's relax, let's go for a walk round the factory, round the outside. That happens. There's a relaxed atmosphere, I would say homely [...] above all homely (Head of Communication, case 4).

Identification with the leader. Another new dimension identified was employees' identification with the leader. This refers to the extent to which the leader is included in employees' relational self (Wang and Rode, 2010), and is a specific identity relationship with their leader (Gu *et al.*, 2015). When individual identification with the leader is high, servant leadership has a more significant impact on employees. In this study, the role of employees' identification with the organization and its relevance for their commitment was underlined by the interviewees:

I've been letting go and developing the others [...] the situation does not let us sleep easy [...]. We add value to people for them to perform their duties better [...] people are not machines and have their specificities (President, case 1).

Rego and Cunha (2011) state that the leader's integrity is repeated in collaborators' integrity, allows their trust and loyalty to be gained, followers' greater identification with the leader and the organization, greater commitment, less absenteeism, more happiness and higher productivity. This is clearly shown in Case E where, despite a majority of women with their inherent personal and work idiosyncrasies (absent for health reasons, maternity, to look after the family, etc.), the absenteeism recorded is notably lower than the average for the

textile sector, which unequivocally reinforces followers' identification with leadership in that company. They understand that the firm has to comply with its leadership's orders, for example, meet delivery deadlines, and see themselves as fundamental in the whole industrial process. Therefore, they are rarely absent.

This type of honest, humanist and considerate leader can be happier, promote followers' happiness, and the organizations and society's progress. On the other hand, exercising leadership without these healthy principles can create damaging, harmful effects on leaders, followers and the whole organization. This consideration is evident in the words of the collaborator in Case 1:

When the distribution work is done well (the employees begin very early with the delivery of barrels and crates of beer) they go home earlier [...] there's also flexibility in the performance [...] if they're not happy, they're always demotivated and this is reflected in sales. For example, we open up and ask when the employee is worried about some family problem, health, [...] we're concerned about helping. Genuinely [...]. If they're not all right mentally performance is lower (Logistics Coordinator, case 2).

Previous research has indicated that employees' identification with the leader could prompt them to form and share similar values to their leaders', and stimulate their willingness to show consistent behaviour with leaders, further strengthening the influence of leaders on employees' motivation, attitude, behaviour and performance (Li *et al.*, 2017).

This strong professional identification with the organization's values helps to clarify the links between this dimension and results, organizational behaviour, for example: employee retention, recognizing its relationship with commitment at the workplace (Meyer *et al.*, 2006).

The higher the level of organizational, involved, affective and collaborative commitment, the better followers' performance, obtaining better organizational results. This is clear in an excerpt from the interview in Case 6:

It's like this, with management, we have a great openness and great [...] great spirit of helping us, we state the problem, for example, I state the problem about the garden and they try to help right away with an answer, if we don't manage to solve it ourselves. There's a lot of that openness. With management I never had any obstacle, they're very open, all of them [...] the inspector is very like that, always looking on the positive side, of what each person does best and if he passes by, gives praise, gives an example. Certainly, I consider it a very positive organisation [...].

Avolio *et al.* (2004) mention in their studies that personal and social identification leads to situations of optimism inducing satisfaction and commitment at work. Moreover, followers' perceptions of the way their leaders' treat them tends to impact on their connection to the organization, namely their intention (or not) to remain there. In this domain, we see the following statement, also in Case 4:

I wouldn't change this company for another, even because of the salary which is spoken so much of today. Why? Because, it's like this, it isn't everything. And here in the company we have conditions, apart from the salary, they're good conditions, we have everything, we have doctors, we have daily support, we have nurses, we have the possibility of conciliating the timetable with the company and the family, if we need to go somewhere with the children or something like that [...]. Ethics are also very important here [...]. (Clerical Officer, Case 4).

The organizations studied here have leadership able to increase involvement, through employees' personal and social identification with the organization, which leads to their greater commitment, inducing people to develop stronger affective and normative bonds. The research revealed a series of dimensions of recognized organizational affectivity interlinked with the servant leadership style. Individuals with a recognized position or with

an apparently great potential influence and impact on followers, i.e. through identification with the leader and trust in this person, cause reinforced motivation (Shamir *et al.*, 1998). Servant leadership has a positive effect on followers' positive emotions as they identify with this.

Finally, in the leadership of the six organizations (cases) studied, there is a whole set of values based on the common understanding conveyed by Greenleaf (1977): leadership should concern itself mainly with others' needs.

Analytic framework proposal

From the dimensions identified in the cases studies and based on the literature review, we construct an analytical framework for servant leadership (Table IV). This framework encompasses a list of items (determinant aspects) regarding each of the dimensions. Each of said aspects will be addressed with purpose of understanding servant leadership practices.

From this framework we identify and understand the main dimensions and practices sustaining servant leadership. So, the servant leaders observed in this research demonstrate suitable capacities to attain the main dimensions of servant leadership: putting followers first, empowering followers, helping them grow and succeed, creating value for the community, and developing and fostering conceptual skills, as well as more two important and new dimensions: family atmosphere and identification with the leader.

Conclusions and implications

This study aimed to identify and understand the main dimensions and practices sustaining servant leadership. Various dimensions explaining this type of leadership identified in the literature review supported the approach to servant leadership practices in the Portuguese organizations (cases) studied and were inserted in our innovative framework.

The servant leaders observed in this research demonstrate suitable capacities to attain the main dimensions of servant leadership. We identified dimensions associated with putting followers first, empowering followers, helping them grow and succeed, creating value for the community, and developing and fostering conceptual skills. However, two new dimensions were found: family atmosphere and identification with the leader.

This research is a stimulating support and a varied and constructive way to analyse servant leadership. Encouraging virtues, promoting diversity, respecting human dignity, not forgetting the search for happiness, promoting a positive organizational climate – aspects which if encouraged can result in desirable consequences for both individuals and organizations.

In theoretical terms, it outlines a new vision of leadership in organizations –servant leadership, more precisely, we propose an analytical framework for servant leadership. Specifically, the intention was to define contributions for understanding the servant leadership found in the organizations analysed. Hopefully this work helps to bring added clarity to servant leadership measurement considerations, and increase research attention to the servant leadership phenomenon in several managerial contexts.

Globally, this study contributes to theoretical development by integrating the servant leadership literature and organizational behaviour literature, and should help servant leadership gain legitimacy as an important and relevant leadership theory. This research also takes an innovative view of leadership, where in terms of the dimensions inherent to servant leadership, attributes considered decisive for organizations are shown and clarified. The study can be considered as innovative, contributing to deeper study of this subject, opening up numerous paths for theoretical development, whatever the context dealt with.

Determinant aspects	Dimensions
Incentives Recognition Commitment Creativity Efforts Trust Social love Facilitation Reinforcement	→ <i>Empowerment</i>
Appreciation Promotion Career growth Support Mentoring Learning Training	→ <i>Helping subordinates grow/succeed</i>
Flexibility Happiness Motivation Help Liberdade Compensation Citizenship Satisfaction Respect Development Orientation	→ <i>Putting subordinates first</i>
Interactopenly Honesty Integrity Relationships Fair form Loyalty Solidarity Moral conduct Transparency Correction	→ <i>Ethical behaviour</i>
Spirituality Virtues Morality Discipline Seriousness Union Sensitivity Preoccupation Humility	→ <i>Altruistic calling</i>

(continued)

Table IV.
Analytical
framework for the
servant leadership

Determinant aspects	Dimensions
Power sharing Leadership Collaboration Delegation Skills Anticipation Visionary spirit Positivity	→ <i>Wisdom or vision</i>
Community/Society Divulgateion Recreation Promotion and social policy Training actions Polyvalence Rotativity Support Shelter Anchor	→ <i>Organizational stewardship</i>
Child protection Family help Medical assistance and medicine Social support Cultural and educational events Positive, stimulating atmosphere	→ <i>Family atmosphere</i>
Identification with the firm Emotional connection/involvement Feeling of belonging Authenticity of the leader	→ <i>Identification with the leader</i>

Table IV.

In an extensive study made by [van Dierendonck et al. \(2017\)](#), the first to confirm measurement using the SLS – Servant Leadership Survey scale from a trans-cultural perspective, the authors concluded that empowerment, humility, integrity, stewardship and authenticity are clearly incorporated in servant leadership in the countries analysed. So servant leadership is a theory more oriented towards collaborators' needs in organizations and its essence can be seen in a similar way throughout Europe. This study confirms the main basic dimensions shown in our qualitative research in the six Portuguese organizations, as presented in [Table IV](#) above.

This research also has interesting practical implications, as it provides evidence of the benefits of servant leadership in organizations. Organizations clearly have a lot to gain in seeking to enhance the manifestations of servant leadership behaviour. This can be achieved by selecting and promoting managers whose leadership style corresponds to the behaviour of the servant leader – that is, empowering followers, helping them grow and succeed, providing emotional healing, behaving ethically, putting followers first, creating value for the community, and developing and fostering conceptual skills. Thus, servant leadership's emphasis on seeing followers become servants may help to fulfil a number of important organizational and societal goals. Servant leadership may also may an important means of influencing ethical behaviour in employees.

This study is new, innovative and clearly topical, regarding the theoretical and practical contributions made. Particularly, the Portuguese context is one of the recent studies of a qualitative nature, revealing all its pertinence and significance given the need for other leadership orientations with society's evolution and also at the socio-political level. There is a clear need for leaders who are seen to be fully of service to their nearest, their collaborators and society, rather than exploiting them.

Our results make another specific contribution to the organizational field by offering an insight into how servant leaders can help an organization perform better and grow through satisfying the psychological needs of the individuals working for it (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016). Thus, servant leadership's vision of followers may help to fulfil a number of important organizational and societal goals. Servant leadership may also be an important means of influencing ethical behaviour in employees. A final contribution of this study is that it gives visibility to servant leadership in Portugal, a country recognized as paying little attention to these aspects and needing to move towards modern leadership standards consistent with the times.

In recruitment and promotion, organizations should also try to select candidates with characteristics of servant leadership. Managers should take various measures to enhance their subordinates' identification with them, such as constructive feedback, heart-to-heart conversations and personalized care. For those employees who have low identification with their leader, organizations should take other measures to improve their service innovation behaviour, such as service-oriented human resource management.

This study, like any other, has limitations to consider. Firstly, this was a thorough and time-consuming qualitative investigation which could have included study of a greater number of organizations. We believe that combination of a qualitative study (essential with regard to the intended aim) and quantitative research covering a larger number of organizations, could enrich the information gathered and give results of reinforced validity and consistency. Secondly, the study cannot be generalized, due to its "case study" nature (Yin, 2015). Therefore, because of the restrictions inherent in qualitative research (preventing a wider geographical and sectorial study), only with caution can conclusions be inferred for a wider organizational context. Finally, the evidence was collected in only one country – Portugal. This design controlled for differences in the national context but means the findings must be considered exploratory until additional research from other nations is available.

Due to these limitations, carrying out wider and more transversal studies, for example, organizations in a given sector of activity could be a fruitful field of research. A suggestion for future research could be based on the inherent dimensions of servant leadership in the private sector, compared to organizations in the public sector. In addition, a future longitudinal study analysing the organizations studied in their clearest dimensions over time could provide worthwhile inferences. Another future line of research is to analyse the personality characteristics of leaders, which could enhance or inhibit servant leadership implementation.

Note

1. Medical services held 2985 appointments, achieving 97 per cent satisfaction in the Collaborators' Opinion Study.

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Further reading

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About the authors

Mário Franco is an Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship and SME Administration at the Department of Management and Economics, Beira Interior University, Portugal. He received his PhD in Management from Beira Interior University in 2002. In 1997, he was a doctoral candidate and participated in the European Doctoral Programme in Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management in Spain and Sweden. His research focuses on strategic alliances, business networks, innovation and business creation. He is also a member of a Research Center (CEFAGE-UBI) and currently involved in several research projects on SMEs. Mário Franco is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: mfranco@ubi.pt

Augusto Antunes is an Invited Professor of Entrepreneurship, Investment Decisions, Leadership and Marketing at the Department of Management, Polytechnic Institute of Viseu – Superior School of Management and Technology, Viseu, Portugal. He received his PhD in Management from Beira Interior University in 2013. Till 2017, he was commercial director in the first Portuguese private Bank – Banco Comercial Português. He was more than 32 years bank experience and participated in several programmes of Leadership oriented to bank employees. In 2017, published a book "Leadership in Positive Organizations". His research focuses on leadership and management in positive organizations. He is also a member of a Research Center: Centro de Estudos em Educação, Tecnologia e Saúde (CI&DETS).

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