

# **One Size Fits All: Servant Leadership an Effective Approach for All Generations**

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**Title****One Size Fits All: Servant Leadership an Effective Approach for All Generations****Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the emerging empirical literature on servant leadership theory and generational cohort theory by examining the relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction and organizational commitment of followers belonging to the three main generational cohorts working in the United States (Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y). Four hundred and fifty two participants from a pool of 2 million responded to the 30-item servant leadership survey as well as the abridged Job in General, the abridged Job Descriptive Index and the Affective Commitment Scale. A MANOVA found no significant relationships between scores for servant leadership attributes and organizational outcomes based on generational cohort affiliation. This study is the first to investigate generational cohort perceptions and organizational outcomes regarding servant leadership utilizing the newly designed and validated servant leadership survey by Dirk van Dierendonck and Inge Nuijten. Based on these results, there appears to be little need to use differentiated leadership approaches to accommodate specific generational cohort leadership preferences when applying servant leadership principles. This is good news for leaders everywhere.

**Keywords**

Generational cohorts, Baby Boomers, GenX, GenY, Servant Leadership, Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment

The recent poor economy coupled with spectacular failures in leadership, many involving ethics, has left many people searching for new solutions. While the recent events have increased the pressure to find new solutions, the search for better approaches to leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not really all that new. Peter Drucker pointed out as far back as 1959 that one of the great challenges management will face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is finding the best approach to lead, inspire, motivate, and continually challenge what he called 'knowledge workers' (Drucker, 1999). While at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the majority of the non-agricultural workers were involved in transformational activities, transforming raw materials into finished goods, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century fewer than 15 percent of US workers were employed in occupations requiring transformational activities, 44 percent were employed in transactional jobs and 41 percent were employed in tacit jobs (Johnson, Manyika, & Yee, 2005: 24). In addition, since 1998, 70 percent of all jobs created in the US fell into the 'tacit' category while companies have been cutting transactional jobs at a steady rate between 1994 and 2004 such as bookkeeping, information technology functions, and clerical work, all of which are being outsourced and off-shored (Bass, 1999; Johnson et al., 2005).

Leadership is increasingly difficult. The modern leader faces pressure from multiple stakeholders, a global competitive and operating environment, and an increasingly diverse workforce (Latham, 2014). At the same time, many followers no longer trust their leaders nor believe that going above and beyond expectations to help their company succeed will be worth the effort (Feldman, 2000; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Leaders of corporations, now more so than ever, are struggling to motivate, inspire, and exhort followers to produce more with less (Marques, 2010). In addition, many scholars,

consultants, and commentators propose leaders will have to adjust their leadership style for the diverse workforce. The increasing diversity of the workforce has brought many advantages as well as many challenges. There are many dimensions of diversity including gender, age, ethnicity, as well as education and more recently the interest in the diverse characteristics and needs of generational cohorts (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). Arsenault (2004) proposes that there are clear differences among the generational cohorts and that those differences influence the effectiveness of leadership and the desired content of leadership development programs. However, the majority of issues identified as different among the generations are issues related to tangible preferences such as music, movies, products (Arsenault, 2004) and working conditions such as work-life balance and the importance of leisure time (Twenge et al., 2010). To address some of these challenges, one area of rising interest among scholars and practitioners are the values-based leadership approaches and theories such as servant leadership. What is needed is a leadership approach that has the potential for leaders to connect with followers at a deeper level and repair the often broken leader-follower relationships as well as develop leader-follower relationships based on respect and loyalty with a high level of trust and fairness. Unfortunately, there is little research related to values-based leadership theories such as servant leadership and their relationship with the differences in generational cohorts.

### **THEORY AND HYPOTHESES**

The interest in the values, attitudes, motivators, and life style choices of the generational cohorts working side-by-side in American corporations is growing (Twenge et al., 2010; van Dierendonck, 2011). The modern workforce is comprised primarily of

three generational cohorts including the Baby Boom Generation (Baby Boomers), Generation X (GenX), and Generation Y (GenY). Many academics, consultants, and self-proclaimed experts propose that there are differences among these generational cohorts that require different leadership styles (Arsenault, 2004; Twenge et al., 2010; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 1999). The similarities and differences between generational cohort characteristics are subject to intense investigation by consumer research organizations (Schewe & Meredith, 2004; Schewe & Noble, 2000), nursing (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Swearingen & Liberman, 2004), business (Papenhausen, 2006), and academia (Arsenault, 2004; Smola & Sutton, 2002). In particular, the leadership needs and wants of the different generational cohorts are of interest as generationally based differences of approaching life hint at generational differences with respect to leadership needs (Arsenault, 2004; Twenge et al., 2010). Servant leadership being an individual-focused and highly ethical approach has the potential to appeal to followers from all three cohorts. Servant leaders focus on meeting follower needs first and organizational needs are being met as an outcome of satisfied followers being more productive, innovative, and loyal (Irving & Longbotham, 2007; Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009; van Dierendonck, 2011). In contrast, transactional or transformational leadership approaches are more focused on how to influence employees to achieve organizational outcomes. In other words, the employee is a means to an end, not the end itself (Bass, 1990).

Finding a leadership approach that resonates with the three currently working generational cohorts in corporate America and that has the ability to restore the trust of followers in leaders may be crucial to corporate outcomes and, in turn, corporate success for companies trying to sustain growth and profitability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global market.

The outcomes of servant leadership have been shown to: (a) be greater follower commitment and engagement; (b) greater organizational citizenship behavior; and (c) improved organizational outcomes through corporate social responsibility and sustainability (van Dierendonck, 2011). While much has been discussed regarding generational cohorts and their perspectives, preferences, and priorities in life, very little empirical, descriptive evidence has been amassed to further substantiate observations made by the popular press (Giancola, 2006). In addition, when looking at generational cohorts with respect to leadership preferences and outcomes of leadership approaches, and in particular servant leadership approaches, again little can be found in the academic literature to indicate if servant leadership should be worth considering by top management teams of American corporations. However, one study (Latham, 2013a; 2013b) found that CEOs who led successful organization transformations resulting in sustained high performance across a comprehensive scorecard demonstrated many servant leadership characteristics including empowerment, accountability, humility, authenticity (integrity), and interpersonal acceptance resulting in high levels of trust.

The purpose of this study was to quantitatively assess and analyze the relationships between key servant leadership constructs and the three generational cohorts in the current U.S. workforce. Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of the study. This paper presents the outcomes of a study that examined the relationship between followers from the three generational cohorts who have a servant leader and organizational outcomes as described by scores evaluating job satisfaction and organizational commitment. This study utilizes the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) developed and validated by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). The SLS was

developed and validated in Europe using participants from the Netherlands and UK and later in Italy (Bobbio, van Dierendonck, & Manganelli, 2012). To date few, if any, studies published have utilized the SLS with participants from the US nor has the SLS been used to examine similarities or differences between BabyBoomer, GenX, and GenY followers with respect to organizational outcomes when the followers are exposed to servant leaders.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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### **Generational Theory**

The concept of generational cohorts was first proposed by Auguste Comte in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century as philosophers began to observe how the socio-cultural environment of man seemed to distinctively shape the world views of large groups of people and were not based solely on the outcome of the biological succession of humans (Comte, 1849). Generational cohort theory as such was conceptualized by Karl Mannheim in 1928 and his original theoretical framework is the basis for current research focused on several aspects of generational cohorts such as the creation or generation of a cohort and the variations in cohort behaviors, values, attitudes, and approaches to life of both society in general and the work environment in particular (Arsenault, 2004; Gentry, Griggs, Deal, Mondore, & Cox, 2011; Mannheim, 1928; Twenge et al., 2010).

Several studies have attempted to make connections between generational cohorts and leadership. For example, Arsenault (2004), in a 790 participant sequential exploratory mixed methods study shows that there are significant differences between generations regarding recalled events. Mostly from the early adolescent years, each generational cohort as a group recalled the same major events such as the Kennedy

assassination recalled by Baby Boomers or the explosion of the space shuttle recalled by GenXers. However, while these events and the associated memories and preferences for music, movies, products, and so forth were different, which has clear implications for marketing, the implications and importance for leaders claimed by Arsenault are not specific and seem to only apply to transactional approaches to leadership. The implications for value-based, individualized leadership approaches are not discussed and are not clear. However, by deploying a modified Checklist of Admired Leaders developed by Kouzes and Posner (2002) where respondents ranked admired characteristics of a leader, Arsenault (2004) was able to show that the leadership characteristic ranked number one by all generations was “honesty” which is also a characteristic espoused by servant leaders. Interestingly, the only other characteristic all generations agreed upon together, and ranked last together, was imagination. While the eight other leadership characteristics were ranked slightly differently by the three current cohorts, Arsenault’s conclusion that there are differences in the generations with respect to leadership preferences does little to help leaders unless they can change their leadership style for everyone they meet. The main problem with the findings is that most characteristics ranked are transactional in nature and to vary one’s transactional leadership style with each interaction makes leading groups and organizations difficult if not impossible.

Other studies have found differences in generational cohorts with respect to the preferences for leadership. For example, to examine the differences in leadership characteristics among generations of managers as perceived by their supervisors and their subordinates, 447 U.S. managers and subordinates answered the Leadership Descriptives

Sort through an online survey (Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007). Similar to Arsenault (2004), differences among generational cohorts with respect to the attributes perceived to be most important in a leader were found. The Mature or Silent Generation valued leaders that listened well while Baby Boomers valued leaders that were credible. GenXers valued credible leaders as well but GenYers valued dedicated leaders. In a second study the goal was to understand the generational differences with respect to leadership behaviors as perceived by the managers (rating self) and perceived by others (rated by subordinates). The Leadership 360® survey was answered by 20,640 participants from more than 6,000 U.S. companies. Canonical discriminant analysis identified key differences among cohorts with respect to leadership practices. Interestingly, the authors found that a maturational effect may be causing the different generational cohort views of self as leaders as the canonical variate ranked the cohorts in order from oldest generation to the youngest with roughly equal spacing between the groups (Sessa et al., 2007). They note this is what “one would expect if the results were due primarily to chronological age rather than cohort” (Sessa et al, 2007: 66). The authors do find that their results are similar to those of previous research and that the differences are present but not to the extent hyped in the popular press. In addition, the authors acknowledge that management level could explain the ‘maturation effect’ observed—different behavioral approaches to leadership can be associated to the level of management a leader is in. Older persons would be in higher levels of management requiring a less individualized and more generalized approach to leadership—which is what the second study uncovered. In addition, the authors do state that behavioral and attitudinal differences were observed but no explanation was provided as to why the differences exist.

Much of the research on generational differences in the workplace has focused on their preferences for work styles and conditions. For example, Rodriguez, Green, and Ree (2003) found after conducting a MANOVA on results from 805 surveys that GenXers preferred challenging tasks that could be accomplished in one workday compared to Boomers who wanted several days for the task. In addition, GenXers preferred the use of the internet for technology, Boomers the phone. Boomers preferred regular workdays, Xers preferred flexibility. Boomers were looking for retirement plans and benefits, Xers were looking for portable 401ks (Rodriguez et al., 2003). Unfortunately, most generational cohort studies are conducted at a single point in time making it difficult to determine the impact of maturational effect on the results. To address this issue Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, and Lance (2010) conducted a longitudinal study of high school seniors across the nation since 1976 called 'Monitoring the Future'. A 6,057 participant sample from the years 1976, 1991, and 2006 representing Baby Boomers (1976), GenXers (1991), and GenYers (2006) ensured that the measurement scale was invariant to the three groups sampled at three different time points. Twenge et al., (2010) found that, "The results of the invariance analyses reveal that the five constructs of interest were assessed equivalently across generations, lending confidence that any differences across generations are due to substantive issues and not changes in the measurement scale" (Twenge et al., 2013: 1131). Latent means analysis showed significant difference across generations ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 518.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $\Delta CFI = .008$ ). A pairwise analysis showed that leisure values as measured in the change in standard deviations ( $d$ ) on scales of work values increased over time and generations (Boomers vs. GenY  $d = 0.57$ ), work centrality declined, extrinsic values peaked with GenX (Boomers and GenX  $d = 0.39$  and GenX and

GenY  $d = 0.13$ ) and contrary to popular belief, GenY does not show higher ratings for social values and intrinsic values when compared to Baby Boomers (GenY to GenX  $d = -.016$  and GenY to Baby Boomers  $d = -0.20$ ). The conclusions suggest that GenYers are more inclined to want to work less, get paid more, and are even less interested in helping others than any generation before them. The study findings mirror the results from another study showing that the rate of narcissistic traits found in individuals have been on the rise over the last four generations with GenY displaying the highest level of narcissistic tendencies of all generations (Twenge & Foster, 2008). This could provide rationale for more individual-based leadership approaches such as servant leadership.

Studies and literature reviews show distinct differences among generations with respect to organizational factors such as values and leadership preference (Dries, Pepermans, & De Kerpel, 2008; Hewlett, Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2009; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Zemke, 2001). Other studies show generations to be more alike than different with respect to work commitment and attitudes (Davis, Pawlowski, & Houston, 2006; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010), looking for leaders who can be respected and trusted (Deal, 2007), leadership practices (Gentry et al., 2011), and work related motivational factors (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998). In addition, the findings from a quantitative study by Gentry et al., (2011) found more similarities than differences among generations when investigating which leadership practices were considered important for organizational success, if managers considered themselves skilled at leadership practices, and if there is a gap between perceived importance of skills and reported skill ratings. The authors found while there were statistically significant differences for ten of the 16 leadership practices across generations, the examination of the effect sizes of the differences were

not of any practical significance. The dichotomy in findings suggests that further studies are needed to carefully describe generational differences and similarities, in particular as they pertain to leadership needs. Studies that include GenY cohort followers are also underrepresented as GenYers have just begun to enter the workforce and are just now experiencing the impact leaders have on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Maybe it is time to start assessing the impact of various leadership approaches on measureable organizational variables vs. simply asking participants what they think they prefer. Given the growing evidence on the effectiveness of servant leadership in a variety of cultural contexts (Bobbio et al., 2012; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) we argue that a good place to start is to examine the differences among the generational cohorts in relation to servant leadership.

### **Servant Leadership Theory**

Servant leadership theory was first introduced by Greenleaf in 1970 but unfortunately without a clear validated definition of the theory (van Dierendonck, 2011). The theory was used in practice and some research was conducted over the years but it wasn't until the late 1990s that the research "stream" dramatically increased producing several variations of the theory along with instruments to measure the constructs. Over the years eight prominent theories emerged including Laub (1999), Wong and Davey (2007), Ehrhart (2004), Denis and Bocarnea (2005), Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora (2008), Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008), and the latest synthesis of the preceding seven theories, van Dierendonck (2011). The dimensions included in the eight theories ranged from 1 to 12 and the individual items from 14 to 99. van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) developed an instrument with eight

dimensions and 30 individual items. This survey was validated in the Netherlands and the UK (van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011) and later in Italy (Bobbio et al., 2012). The eight dimensions included in the final version included: empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, authenticity, courage, forgiveness, and stewardship.

The synthesis of servant leadership theories and instruments by van Dierendonck (2011) resulted in a coherent integrated model of servant leadership where humble but courageous leadership combined with integrity and authenticity provide a credible basis for leading at all levels of an organization. Servant leaders create an environment for empowerment and risk taking with forgiveness but also hold followers accountable for their actions and outcomes. The servant leader is also a steward of the people and the organization as a whole. When it comes to credit, servant leaders are found standing back and allow the credit to go to the followers. For a full discussion of the eight dimensions see van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). The eight-dimensions servant leadership model and instrument has been validated in three European countries including the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, and Italy. According to van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) the evidence supports the notion that servant leadership is effective across cultures and may be applicable to a wide variety of people even when the cultural characteristics indicate that it might not be a good fit. Based on the universal nature of the eight dimensions, along with the growing evidence of applicability across cultures, we sought to test the hypothesis that servant leadership was applicable to members of different generational cohorts.

*Hypothesis 1. There is no difference in the level of servant leadership reported by the three generational cohorts working in the US (Baby boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y).*

### **Organizational Variables**

According to van Dierendonck (2011) organizational outcomes related to servant leadership include follower job attitudes, follower performance, and overall organizational outcomes. Previous studies such as van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) and Bobbio et al., (2012) found positive relationships between the eight servant leadership dimensions and organizational variables including: perceived leader integrity, cynicism, affective commitment, continuance commitment, normative commitment, extra-role behaviors, and anti-role behaviors. Job satisfaction was chosen for this study as one of two variables to study because it is directly related to generational workforce differences previously identified and its relationship to an individual's intention to leave the organization. Previous studies such as Joo (2010) and Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky (2002) found evidence supporting the notion that increased job satisfaction was related to lower job turnover intent. According to Meyer and Allen (1991) affective organizational commitment denotes the level of personal alignment of the employee with their organization, continuance commitment which is based on the unwillingness to leave an organization for fear of loss of benefits such as pensions or health care, and lastly as normative commitment which has an employee staying with an organization based on a perceived moral obligation.

*Hypothesis 2. There is no difference in the level of job satisfaction between the three generational cohorts working in the US (Baby boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y).*

*Hypothesis 3. There is no difference in the level of affective organizational commitment between the three generational cohorts working in the US (Baby boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y).*

## **METHODS**

### **Sample**

The target population for this study was made up of working adults aged 18 to 65 currently employed in the United States and who were or had been directly managed by an individual they would refer to as “manager,” “boss,” “chief,” “foreman,” “shift-lead” or “group lead”. The survey was completed by 452 participants obtained from a pool of 2 million managed by a firm specializing in business research. The data collection process included strict procedures to ensure complete and high quality survey responses. Of the 452 participants, the gender ratios show a higher percentage of men, 248 (54.9%) compared to women, 204 (45.1%). The mean age of the entire sample was 39.5 years (s.d. = 11.35), with the mean ages for both genders being similar, 40.34 (s.d. = 11.95) for men and 40.45 (s.d. = 12.05) for women. The educational levels show a higher level of education as measured by the number of participants with a Bachelors degree or higher in the sample (70%) compared to the average US population (28%) (US Census Bureau, 2011). Broken down by generational cohort, the gender ratios of the population sample show a higher percentage of males over females across all three generations. Of the Baby Boomers, 54.7% were male, 45.3% female, 58.3% of GenXers were male, 41.7% female, and 51.7% of GenYers were male, 48.3% were female. The educational levels by generational cohort show a higher level of education in both GenX and GenY cohorts compared to the participants in the Baby Boomer cohort. Of the GenX sample 78.8% of

the participants had a college degree (Bachelors or higher), 76.7% of the participants of the GenY sample had a college degree compared to 54% of the Baby Boomers who had a college degree. Based on the U.S. Census Bureau report (2011) on educational attainment 27% of GenYers, 32% of GenXers, and 29% of Baby Boomers have a bachelors degree or higher.

Looking at years employed at their present job, Baby Boomers almost evenly span the range for all employment length brackets, with 21.3% of Baby Boomers working for 26 years or more for the same employer. The GenXer cohort had 85% participants employed for 15 years or less with their current employer and only 2% employed for 26 years or more, and the GenY cohort had 71% of the participants working for their current employer for 5 years or less. With respect to organization size as measured by numbers of employees, over 30% of the participants worked for employers with over 10,000 workers. The prevalence of employees in the sample working for large, 10,000+ employee companies could be explained by the distribution of participants by industry as a large portion of the participants were employed in organizations that typically have large workforces such as healthcare, retail, education, and government. The participants from the sample represented a large cross section of industries employing workers in the U.S. 13% of the participants worked for healthcare providers or HMOs, 9% in retail, 8% for education or college institutions, 6% worked for government and primary and secondary education, 5% were in banking, finance, and real estate, and 4% worked for computer software, business services, engineering, architecture, management consulting, government, and transportation firms or institutions.

## Measures

For this study three instruments were used to measure the three variables: servant leadership, job satisfaction, and affective organizational commitment. The Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) instrument (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) was used to measure servant leadership. The abridged Job in General scale (Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007; Russell et al., 2004) and the abridged Job Descriptive Index (Stanton et al., 2001) were used to measure job satisfaction. The Affective Commitment Scale (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993) was used to measure affective organization commitment. The abridged Job in General scale (aJIG), the abridged Job Descriptive Index (aJDI), and the Affective Commitment Scale (ACS) are widely used for organizational research and are considered to be gold standards for measuring job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Meyer et al., 1993; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Russell et al., 2004; Stanton et al., 2001). The three instruments were combined into one survey and emailed to participants.

*Servant leadership survey validity and reliability.* For the (SLS) van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) as mentioned above set out to develop and validate a new multi-dimensional instrument to measure servant leadership. The final measure integrates the key aspects of servant leadership while focused on the leader-follower relationship from the viewpoint of the follower. The authors evaluated factorial validity, internal consistency, content validity, and incremental validity using a three step process. By completing two qualitative and eight quantitative studies (approx. 1600 participants) the authors were able to define the eight dimensions of servant leadership using exploratory and confirmatory factor. The internal consistency of the subscales was strong and the

authors conclude that the SLS measures both the servant and the leader aspect of servant leadership. The addition of accountability, forgiveness, and courage, factors that were absent from all other servant leadership instruments, was validated through second-order exploratory factor analysis and thus the authors feel the SLS is the most complete multi-dimensional instrument currently available for measuring servant leadership (van Dierendonck, 2011). It was subsequently validated in Italy confirming the model and instrument in a third context (Bobbio et al., 2012).

To validate the SLS within a US context, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted which supported an eight-factor model. While the model fit of the eight factor model was acceptable, ( $\chi^2[df = 349] = 1097.9, p < .001, CFI = .91, SRMR = .05, TLI = .90, AIC = 1273.9, RMSEA = .06$ ) modifications to the item structure yielded a slightly better fitting model ( $\chi^2[df = 348] = 877.7, p < .001, CFI = .93, SRMR = .04, TLI = .92, AIC = 1051.7.9, RMSEA = .06$ ) which indicated that further refinement of the item structure could further enhance the eight factor model.

***Abridged Job In General Index and Abridged Job Descriptive Index for job satisfaction.*** The aJIG/aJDI scales were derived from the original Job Descriptive Index (JDI) and Job in General Scale (JIG) (Russell, et al., 2004; Stanton, et al., 2001). The coefficient alpha estimates of reliability are .76 for satisfaction with pay, .81 for satisfaction with promotion, .82 for satisfaction with coworkers, .86 for satisfaction with work, and .79 for satisfaction with supervision. The aJDI continues to retain the characteristics of the full-length survey while reducing the time participants need to answer the survey. The JIG scale accompanies the JDI to further measure job satisfaction. The aJIG scale was created to provide an abridged version while maintaining the

psychometric properties of the full length scale (Russell, et al., 2004). Russell et al. (2004) conducted three studies to develop and cross-validate the aJIG and produced an alpha coefficient of .87 which correlated strongly with that of the original scale,  $r = .97$ . The aJDI and aJIG scale are typically administered together as a 30-item scale.

*Affective commitment scale for organizational commitment.* The 6-item version of the ACS was used (Meyer & Allen, 1997). The 6 items are endorsed on a 7 point scale, with response options ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7) with two items reverse scored. Reliabilities reported by Allen and Meyer (1996) are typically above .80.

## RESULTS

Before beginning data analysis the normal distribution of the means for servant leadership, affective commitment, job descriptive index, and abbreviated job in general scales were evaluated using Kurtosis and Skewness. For servant leadership kurtosis was .128, for affective commitment it was  $-.389$ , for job in general it was  $-.212$ , and for job descriptive index it was  $-.533$ . Values near zero indicate shapes close to normal as seen for servant leadership even though the positive number for servant leadership indicates a flatter than normal shape. Negative values indicate a distribution which is more peaked than normal. Values  $\pm 1$  are considered very good (Cooper & Schindler, 2008). For servant leadership skewness was  $-.473$ , for affective commitment  $-.380$ , for job descriptive index  $-.494$ , and for job in general  $-.974$ . The high level of skewness for the job in general values, which was also reflected in the histogram, resulted in the separation of the results from both scales for the analysis of job satisfaction.

### Means and Standard Deviations

The means and standard deviations for each of the dependent variables by generational cohort were computed. Servant leadership means across all three generations are very similar, clustering around 3.4 with standard deviations on average of only 0.61. Similar groupings of means and standard deviations can be seen for affective commitment, job description, and job in general. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the dependent variables by generation.

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**Correlation analysis.** To look at relationships between the dependent variables of the overall servant leadership scale, servant leadership subscale items, job satisfaction, and affective commitment, Pearson's correlation coefficient was utilized to estimate the linear association. The degree of correlation is considered 'strong' if the values are  $r \geq .50$  (Cooper & Schindler, 2008). Table 2 shows the correlation matrix for GenY, GenX, and Baby Boomers by organizational variable and table 3 shows the correlation matrix for servant leadership dimensions and organizational variables.

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The analysis begins with the youngest of the three generations, GenY. For GenY the correlations between servant leadership overall scale, job satisfaction, and affective commitment scale means are above  $r > .60$  and statistically significant with values for servant leadership relationships ranging from  $r(149) = .60$  (servant leadership and job descriptive index,  $p > .01$ ) to  $r(149) = .66$ ,  $p > .01$  (for servant leadership and affective

commitment). Correlations between abbreviated job descriptive index (aJDI) and abbreviated job in general (aJIG) were as high as  $r(149) = .75$  (for aJDI descriptive index and aJIG,  $p > .01$ ).

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A further analysis of the subscale items for the servant leadership scale namely empowerment, standing back, accountability, forgiveness, courage, authenticity, humility, and stewardship and aJDI, aJIG, and affective commitment showed that empowerment had the strongest connection to job satisfaction and affective commitment while accountability, forgiveness and courage had the lowest. For GenX the values for servant leadership relationships were lower than for both GenY and Baby Boomers with values ranging from  $r(149) = .30$  (for servant leadership and aJIG,  $p > .01$ ) to  $r(149) = .56$  (for servant leadership and affective commitment,  $p > .01$ ). As with the GenY values, a further analysis of the subscale items for the servant leadership scale showed that empowerment had the strongest connection to job satisfaction and affective commitment while accountability and courage had the lowest. Interestingly, the values, while still mostly significant, for GenX were lower than for GenY and only two correlations were above  $r \geq .50$ , both for empowerment. The only non-significant result was for courage and the job in general scores.

While not as high as the GenY values, the Baby Boomer servant leadership relationship values ranged from  $r(148) = .49$  (for servant leadership and aJIG,  $p > .01$ ) to  $r(148) = .62$  (for servant leadership and aJDI,  $p > .01$ ). The final set of values undergoing a further analysis of the servant leadership subscale values and the organizational outcomes scales were the Baby Boomer values. As seen with both GenY and GenX, the

Baby Boomers too showed that empowerment had the strongest connection to job satisfaction, job in general, and affective commitment while accountability and courage had the lowest. As with GenX, the values, while still mostly significant, were lower than for GenY and only five correlations were above  $r \geq .50$ , three of which are for empowerment. The only non-significant result was for accountability and the job description scores

Across all three generations the servant leadership attribute of empowerment consistently showed a strong relationship with job satisfaction and affective commitment. van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) saw similar relationships in their servant leadership scale validation study. The strongest relationships were between empowerment and job satisfaction ( $r = .62, p < .01$ ) and organizational commitment ( $r = .62, p < .01$ ). This study saw similar relationships, empowerment and job satisfaction were strongly correlated for GenYers, ( $r = .63, p < .01$ ), GenXers ( $r = .57, p < .01$ ), and Baby Boomers ( $r = .60, p < .01$ ) and organizational commitment for GenYers ( $r = .62, p < .01$ ), GenXers ( $r = .56, p < .01$ ), and Baby Boomers ( $r = .56, p < .01$ ).

Courage and accountability showed the lowest associations across all three generations. The overall strong linear association between the dependent variables as well as the skewness of the job in general data presented some concern with respect to the next step in the analysis, the MANOVA, as multicollinearity between dependent variables can reduce statistical power as variables are essentially redundant and outliers can affect MANOVA results (Bates, 2005).

***Analysis of variance.*** For the analysis for variance a one-way MANOVA was performed with generational cohort affiliation of the participant being the single factor

(independent variable) and servant leadership, affective commitment, job in general, and job descriptive index being the dependent variables. The MANOVA was used to determine whether the population means of the dependent variables varied across the three generational cohorts. To rule out that the skewness of the value distribution of the job in general data had an effect on the MANOVA results, MANOVA's were run with or without the job in general dataset. No significant differences in the outcomes were observed.

First the homogeneity of covariances using Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was tested. There was no violation of the assumption of homogeneity of covariances as the  $p$  value was greater than  $p > .001$  ( $p = .11$ ). Next Wilk's lambda was used to see if the one-way MANOVA was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). There was a statistically significant difference between generations and job descriptive index values ( $F(3, 892) = 2.81, p < .05$ ; Wilk's  $\lambda = 0.95$ , partial  $\epsilon^2 = .025$ ). The partial eta squared of only .025 denotes that only 2.5% of the variability in the responses is accounted for by affiliation of the respondent to one of the three generations. The concern for this low value is confirmed in the follow-up one-way ANOVA's which show no significant differences between generational cohort affiliation and each dependent variable. The significance levels are above  $p < .05$ . Servant leadership has a  $p = .19$ , affective commitment  $p = .18$ , job descriptive index  $p = .78$ , and job in general  $p = .42$ . Based on these results the null hypotheses could not be rejected. The overarching MANOVA showed that the null hypotheses had to be retained.

## DISCUSSION

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

The purpose of this study was to explore the differences among three generational cohorts (Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y) in the United States with respect to servant leadership, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. This study found that followers from different generations value servant leaders equally as no significant differences were seen between generations and organizational outcomes when followers were exposed to servant leaders. These findings provide additional insights into the applicability of servant leadership to a diverse group of followers.

Previous studies, such as Arsenault (2004), Sessa, et al. (2007), and Twenge, et al. (2010), identified differences in the generational cohorts and proposed that these differences required leaders adjust their style accordingly to be effective. In addition, the generational stereotypes in the popular press ranges from Baby Boomers being hierarchical and entirely focused on corporate ladder climbing, to catatonic GenXers, to entitled, whiney, and high maintenance GenYers. However, the results of this study suggest that leaders, if they adopt a servant leadership approach, can be effective leading all three generations currently working in the United States. It seems that when it comes to servant leadership, one size does fit all. In addition, a servant leadership approach as described by van Dierendonck (2011) resonates strongly with followers aged 18-65 from various industries and levels of education.

This study has also added new insights into the servant leadership model and corresponding survey instrument proposed by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), during the development and validation of their servant

leadership survey instrument, discovered that servant leadership dimensions and job satisfaction and organizational commitment were highly correlated. The authors inferred from their study findings that the primary aspects of servant leader behavior are empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, and stewardship with authenticity, courage, and forgiveness as secondary aspects. The correlation data from this study show a very similar pattern with one exception—accountability. Accountability had one of the weakest relationships with the two organizational outcomes across all three generations. Accountability also had the weakest relationship for organizational commitment per van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) and the second weakest relationship for job satisfaction, which is consistent with this study's findings. However, the authors added accountability to the primary aspects after conducting factor analysis from both phases of their validation studies. Conversely, the weaker correlations between courage and accountability and organizational outcomes seen by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) were also seen in this study. Overall the findings suggest that servant leadership may have the potential to enhance or replace transformational leadership with respect to influencing corporate success in the age of the highly educated and emancipated worker (Latham, 2014).

Consistent with the findings of Latham (2013a and 2013b) the study also suggests that leadership teams could benefit from embracing servant leadership attributes as an approach that will resonate with members from several generations and produce desired organizational results. While differences in generations are important considerations for marketing, work design, and organizational policy, there appears to be little need to use differentiated leadership approaches when one adopts a servant leadership approach.

Current and future leaders continuously working on empowering their followers by treating them with respect and as equals, listening to and acting upon their input and ideas, treating all members of a team as equally as possible, and being flexible will be seen as supportive of their followers and should see very positive organizational outcomes in return.

For those members of organizations charged with leader development, adopting servant leadership as a viable approach and working towards a goal of having more servant leaders in the organization could result in a shift in organizational culture towards altruism with the outcomes being increased productivity, innovation, and reduced turnover. Identifying servant leaders as mentors of others and also rewarding servant leaders for their contributions would set a precedent. On the other hand, discouraging dark leaders or removing them from positions of power should also support corporate outcomes.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The main limitations of this study are a result of the overall study design and the sampling approach. Studying human behavior using quantitative approaches exclusively is increasingly becoming problematic as the very complex nature of human interactions is, to a large part, constructed and as such can benefit greatly from insights gleaned from qualitative approaches (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2008). Blending the rich descriptions of participants exploring leadership using the various qualitative approaches could support and strengthen the quantitative findings from this study and others. A mixed methods approach may have been beneficial to further examine some of the study findings such as the overwhelming response to the dimension of empowerment and the lukewarm effects

of courage and accountability on organizational outcomes. Participants were only available from a panel provided by the organization providing access to participants. Using members from a panel can bias the population profile of the sample towards individuals who are technologically savvy, educated, and of higher than average socio-economic status thus limiting access to the voices of supervised employees in the US. The voices of employees without online access, limited education, and lower economic status may not be captured.

This study needs to be repeated in the United States in corporate settings that include for-profit, non-profit, educational, religious, and government settings to name a few to add validity to this studies' findings. In addition, repeating this study in cultural settings outside of the United States would help distinguish between culturally influenced responses and also highlight commonalities between culturally diverse followers. This data would be invaluable for large, multi-national corporations with culturally diverse workforces and with efforts to develop leaders that can lead across cultural and national divides. It is not clear if altruistic leadership approaches are appreciated, for example, in cultures that have high power distances such as Asian cultures (Hofstede, 1980). In addition, adding instruments evaluating other leadership approaches such as transformational leadership to the study could help crystallize the true essence of servant leadership, the core values so to speak, and demarcate servant leadership even more from transformational leadership or spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003).

Emotional intelligence has been linked to positive leadership behavior (Dearborn, 2002). Investigating the emotional IQ of servant leaders as opposed to non-servant leaders could add further insight into the primary aspects of servant leadership behavior

and provide further tools for organizations seeking to identify and develop servant leaders (Dearborn, 2002). It would also be of benefit to understand if there is a hierarchical influence on how much of a servant leader a person can be and where servant leadership approaches are appropriate.

In conclusion, while generational cohorts may differ in many aspects, appreciation for being led by a servant leader was not one of them. Further research into the servant leadership construct is warranted based on the positive organizational results of servant leadership documented in this study. Leadership theory development and validation efforts have been focused on a few dominant theories such as transformational leadership, yet a rise in interest in servant leadership has resulted in the creation of conceptual frameworks and accompanying instruments such as the servant leadership survey by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). The data generated from this study further supports the validity of the theoretical framework and instrument for servant leadership as proposed by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) and, in turn, enriches leadership theory by presenting a leadership approach that has a strong relationship to positive organizational results such as increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Servant leadership could become a popular leadership approach for followers from multiple generations, different education levels, and from a multitude of industries. Paired with transformational leadership, servant leadership approaches may be the missing factor in the leadership equation needed for leading the highly educated, emancipated, modern workforce that is characteristic of working America. By respecting followers for their innate human needs of wanting to be seen as the caring, hoping,

yearning human beings that they are, servant leaders can again begin to exceed expectations and fuel innovation and corporate success.

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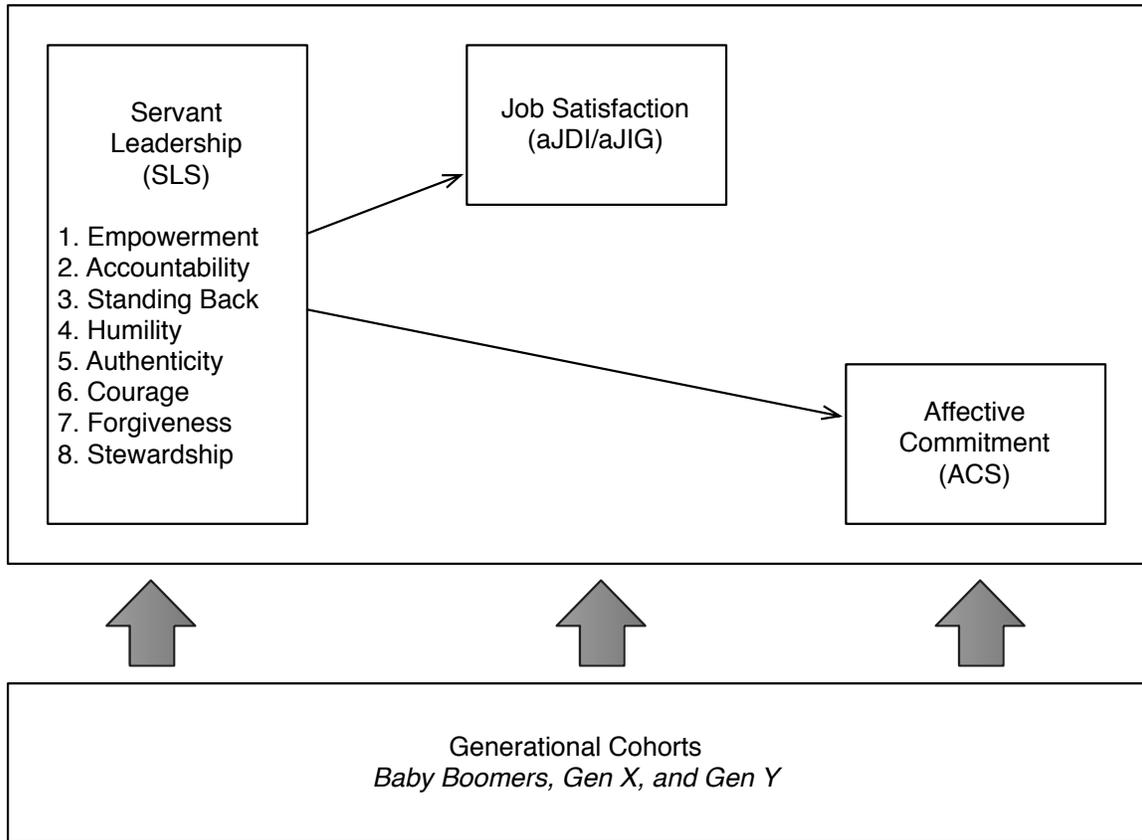
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**FIGURE 1**  
**Theoretical Framework**



**TABLE 1**  
**Means and standard deviations for Servant Leadership, Organizational Commitment, and Job Satisfaction**

Measure	Baby Boomer		GenX		GenY	
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.
Servant Leadership	3.39	0.62	3.44	0.61	3.51	0.60
Affective Commitment	4.63	1.43	4.52	1.43	4.33	1.42
Job Description	1.96	0.68	2.02	0.69	1.99	0.70
Job in General	2.20	0.88	2.07	0.97	2.11	0.92

**TABLE 2**  
**Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Organizational Outcome Variables by Generational Cohort<sup>a</sup>**

Independent Variable	GenY			GenX			Baby Boomers		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	2	3	4
1. Servant Leadership									
2. Job Descriptive	.66			.56			.62		
3. Job in General	.61	.75		.30	.71		.49	.72	
4. Affective Commitment	.66	.72	.69	.61	.64	.61	.54	.64	.71

<sup>a</sup> n = 151 for GenY, n = 151 for GenX, n = 150 for Baby Boomers, ns = not significant. Coefficients greater than .02 are significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

**TABLE 3**  
**Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Servant Leadership dimensions and Organizational Variables by Generational Cohort<sup>a</sup>**

SLS Dimension	GenY			GenX			Baby Boomers		
	aJIG	aJDI	ACS	aJIG	aJDI	ACS	aJIG	aJDI	ACS
1. Empowerment	.63	.62	.62	.57	.35	.56	.60	.54	.56
2. Standing Back	.54	.52	.53	.45	.22	.43	.59	.48	.45
3. Accountability	.25	.21	.34	.31	.26	.26	ns	.20	.27
4. Forgiveness	.42	.39	.42	.43	.31	.39	.44	.29	.42
5. Courage	.36	.27	.35	.24	ns	.26	.37	.24	.25
6. Authenticity	.56	.44	.47	.40	.16	.42	.42	.36	.39
7. Humility	.59	.52	.55	.44	.17	.46	.62	.44	.48
8. Stewardship	.55	.53	.52	.45	.24	.43	.40	.31	.34

<sup>a</sup> n = 151 for GenY, n = 151 for GenX, n = 150 for Baby Boomers, ns = not significant. Coefficients greater than .02 are significant at the .01 level (2-tailed). aJIG = abbreviated Job in General, aJDI = abbreviated Job Descriptive Index, ACS = Affective Commitment