



# First to serve and protect, then to lead: Exploring servant leadership as a foundation for Canadian policing

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## ABSTRACT

Canadian police leadership is in the spotlight. In May 2017, three Canadian government studies concluded that the organizational culture inside Canada's national police force was dysfunctional and appeared to lack a culture of leadership. Similar criticisms were levelled against other Canadian police agencies, and the new Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was specifically mandated to address workplace bullying, harassment, and abuse of authority. In August 2018, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police 2018 Executive Global Studies program called on police leaders to demonstrate "courageous leadership" to address the predatory and exclusionary behaviours found inside their agencies. In this concept paper, an alternative view of leadership is put forward as a framework to address these challenges. Servant leadership is a moral/ethical perspective that should intuitively resonate with police officers, particularly the next generation of police leaders. To explore the case for adopting this leadership approach in Canadian policing, its foundational concepts are presented. A description of the limited academic research on servant leadership in policing is described, and the article concludes with recommendations and questions to direct future research on exploring servant leadership in the context of Canadian policing.

**Key Words** Canadian police culture; workplace harassment; police leadership; servant leadership; millennials; inclusion.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Canada's Police Leadership Challenge

Police officers in Canada, like their counterparts in other countries, begin their careers by pledging an oath of service. From that day forward, they strive to serve and protect their community to the best of their abilities. A review of annual policing awards in one Canadian province reveals that many officers serve others courageously and with great success (British Columbia Ministry of Justice, 2017). Yet, there are recent reports that the commitment to serve police officers, themselves, is not as visible in the ethos of Canadian police leadership.

For example, during the month of May 2017, three Canadian government studies concluded that the organizational culture inside Canada's national police force was dysfunctional. Fraser (2017), McPhail (2017), and Ferguson (2017) reported that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) was plagued by workplace incidents of abuse of authority, harassment, and bullying. The authors argued that, even after decades of previous studies, recommendations,

and initiatives designed to shift the culture inside this iconic police institution, the RCMP still appeared to lack a positive culture of leadership.

Fraser (2017) explored why several high-profile members of the RCMP sued their employers for harassment, concluding that they did so because "...they had no confidence in the internal systems of the RCMP to deal with their concerns" (para.1). McPhail (2017) investigated 264 workplace harassment allegations reported to the RCMP Civilian Review and Complaints Commission, finding that: "Abuse of authority remains a significant problem within the RCMP" (p.5). Ferguson (2017) investigated the RCMP's mental health support system and concluded that the RCMP "...fell short of meeting member's mental health needs" (para.4.19).

Although these reports focused on the RCMP, editorial and opinion articles have appeared to generalize these findings to other Canadian police agencies. One such article was published in *The Globe and Mail* newspaper titled, "It's not just the RCMP: Police culture is toxic" (Bikos, 2017). The author, citing her experience as a former police officer in Ontario and the findings from her PhD research, wrote: "The issues

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in these reports are not new to police administrations and government bodies, and are far from just an RCMP problem” (para 8).

These three reports were released at a time when a national search was underway to find a new RCMP Commissioner (Harris and Crawford, 2017). The search concluded on April 16, 2018, when Assistant Commissioner Brenda Lucki was appointed the 34th Commissioner of the RCMP, the first woman to be appointed to the position on a permanent basis (Tasker, 2018). On May 10, 2018, Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale, in his mandate letter to Commissioner Lucki (Goodale, 2018), clearly defined the leadership challenge that lay before her:

In support of culture change, you will need to prioritize that the RCMP is free from bullying, harassment, and sexual violence, including a comprehensive response to the underlying issues identified in recent reviews undertaken by the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for the RCMP and Sheila Fraser.

The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACCP) also issued a leadership challenge to its 2018 Global Studies program participants (CACCP Global, 2018). This cohort of 21 rising police leaders from across the country was tasked with investigating equity, inclusion, and fundamental respect in policing. After determining that, “Policing in Canada is experiencing a crisis of credibility, both internally and in the public eye, arising from the existence of exclusionary environments within police organizations” (p.4), their domestic and international research led them to conclude that the concept of authentic inclusion is essential to changing Canadian police culture. Their recommended strategies for creating authentic inclusion included challenging assimilation in police cultures, widening pathways to talent, and engaging in courageous leadership to address predatory and exclusionary behaviours.

This purpose of this article is to explore one way that Canadian police leaders might begin their task of rebuilding a new policing culture through a courageous leadership approach. This new police culture must be one that repairs historical organizational wounds, addresses countless new operational pressures, and is accepted by the next generation of police officers who, some believe, require a very different style of leadership (Barbuto and Gottfredson, 2016).

As theory can inform practice, we propose that current police executives might begin their task by exploring emerging leadership theories and perspectives (Dinh, Lord, Gardner et al., 2014). More specifically, that they consider a leadership perspective where police senior executives, managers, and supervisors strive first to serve and protect the needs of their police officers, much like their police officers strive first to serve and protect the needs of people in their communities. One such model is “servant leadership” as envisioned by Robert K. Greenleaf (1977/2002). This moral/ethical leadership approach has the potential to be used as a new lens to examine police leadership—one that sees leadership as an act of service, rather than an act of power.

To explore the case for servant leadership in Canadian policing, a brief summary of its foundational principles is presented in this paper. This will be followed by an overview

of some of the academic research on servant leadership. The results of a literature search for existing research on servant leadership and policing is presented, and the article concludes with several important recommendations and questions that can guide future research.

### Foundational Principles of Servant Leadership

At its core, the premise of servant leadership is that a leader’s focus is first and foremost on serving the highest-order needs of his or her followers. Robert Greenleaf articulated this premise in a series of essays that would later become the foundation of the modern-day servant leadership perspective. In *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf, 1970), he described finding his inspiration in the Hermann Hesse short novel, *The Journey to the East* (1956). In the story, the humble servant, Leo, who is accompanying and assisting the travelers on their long journey, is later revealed to be the head of the ancient order that the travelers were searching to locate.

Although Greenleaf (1977/2002) did not provide a concise definition of a servant leader in his essays, he did describe who a servant leader is: “The servant-leader is servant first—as Leo was portrayed. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (p.27).

Continuing his articulation of the foundation of his philosophy, Greenleaf described a test to determine if the servant leadership approach is in action:

The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (p.27)

Shifting the focus of leadership away from meeting the needs of the leader and towards the needs of the followers is not a modern idea. The historical philosopher Lao Tzu (1991), in the ancient text *Tao Te Ching*, identified this paradox thousands of years ago when he wrote:

When the Master governs, the people are hardly aware that he exists. Next best is a leader who is loved. Next, one who is feared. The worst is one who is despised ... The Master doesn’t talk, he acts. When his work is done, the people say, “Amazing: we did it, all by ourselves!” (verse 17)

In his book, *The Case for Servant Leadership*, Keith (2015) identified several other historical figures who could be viewed as exemplars of the servant leadership ethos including George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Mahatma Gandhi. Keith also points to modern examples of servant leadership in the public lives of Dr. Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, and Nelson Mandela.

Keith (2015) broadly summarized servant leadership in terms of two basic leadership models—the power model and the service model. He wrote:

According to the power model, leadership is about how to accumulate and wield power, how to make people do

things, how to attack and win. It is about clever strategies, applying pressure, and manipulating people to get what you want. (p.19)

In contrast, Keith explains that the service model of leadership has a different focus: “The whole point of the service model is to be of service—to identify and meet the needs of others. It is about paying attention to others and treating them right” (p.23). He wrote that even with the passing of Robert Greenleaf in 1990, leadership students, academics, and experts such as Ken Blanchard, Stephen Covey, Peter Drucker, and Peter Senge have continued to see servant leadership as a positive and viable philosophy for modern leadership. At the same time, academic researchers have struggled to accurately measure it, apply it, and validate its effectiveness in day-to-day organizational life (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

### Current Academic Research on Servant Leadership

Much of the scholarly debate on servant leadership has focused on its main criticism: the lack of a precise definition from where research can begin. In his synthesis of servant leadership research, Van Dierendonck (2011) wrote “...despite its introduction four decades ago and empirical studies that started more than 10 years ago, there is still no consensus about a definition and theoretical framework of servant leadership” (p. 1231). In an effort to move towards a definition, Van Dierendonck integrated the major academic servant leadership models into six overarching characteristics that are repeatedly displayed by servant leaders, as experienced from the point of view of followers (p.1232-1234). These were: (a) empowerment and development of others; (b) humility; (c) authenticity; (d) interpersonal acceptance; (e) providing direction; and (f) stewardship.

Using these six characteristics, Van Dierendonck (2011) contrasted Servant Leadership with the key characteristics of seven other well-known leadership theories: Transformational Leadership; Authentic Leadership; Ethical Leadership; Level 5 Leadership; Empowering Leadership; Spiritual Leadership; and Self-Sacrificing Leadership (p. 1234-1239). Although each of these leadership theories shared some differences and similarities with servant leadership, Van Dierendonck (2011) wrote, “None of the theories described above incorporate all six key characteristics, which puts servant leadership in a unique position” (p.1238).

More recently in the academic literature, Baldomir and Hood (2016) presented servant leadership “...as an ideal leadership approach for introducing and implementing change within the context of organizations” (p. 27). Building on Lewin’s (1958) three steps of organization change (unfreezing, changing, and re-freezing), they suggest that applying the attributes of servant leadership during these steps will ensure that followers have what they need to successfully navigate difficult changes. This is particularly true when leaders fully accept their role as stewards of their organizations.

Recent literature has also suggested that organizations that adopt an ethos of servant leadership will be highly sought out by the newest generation of employees—the Millennials. Although some leadership scholars refute the idea that different generations require different leadership approaches (Rudolph, Rauvola, & Zacher, 2018), Barbuto and Gottfredson (2016) write that the generation of employees

born between 1982 and 1999, soon to be the largest generation in the workplace, have very different needs. In particular, the Millennials reportedly have higher expectations for finding meaning in work, want more frequent and candid feedback, and want managers who are very supportive. Barbuto and Gottfredson explain:

If organizations want to compete for and retain top Millennial talent, organizations must make themselves attractive to Millennials. This will require that organizations develop a leadership base that is suited to lead Millennials. We suggest that servant leadership is likely the optimal leadership style for creating an organization rich in human capital development and for making an organization a preferred work-place for the Millennial generation. (p. 59)

As academic leadership scholars continue to debate the precise definition and framework of servant leadership, several researchers have studied how the philosophy might be applied within the context of police leadership.

### Literature Search for Servant Leadership in Policing

Although academic literature on police leadership abounds (Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2014), servant leadership in policing is sparsely researched. For example, using the on-line CACP “RF Connect” search engine, the University of Victoria “Summon” library database, and Google Scholar, queries of the combined terms “Servant Leadership” with “Policing” and “Law Enforcement” resulted in only nine articles that directly referenced servant leadership and policing within their titles or abstracts.

Of the nine, three were brief articles published in the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*. These articles by Pangaro (2010), Gardner & Reece (2012), and Barath (2013), were editorial in nature, and advocated for investment in servant leadership as a model that might address the impending challenges facing law enforcement executives. An additional abstract by Matteson (2009) published in the *Australian Law Enforcement Executive Forum Journal* also appears to highlight the perceived value of servant leadership for policing, stressing the critical role that supportive organizational relationships play in effective police leadership.

Three other articles located in the literature were each written to meet academic requirements. Two were doctoral dissertations, Cortrite (2007) and Badger (2017), while a third originated from a university-based police leadership development program (Warren, 2012). As with the previously cited articles, each advocated for the adoption of the servant leadership ethos in policing.

Cortrite (2007) framed his dissertation within the context of ethical police leadership. Identifying that police in America “have been mired in a succession of corruption scandals for the last 30 years” (p.vi), he conducted an action research project in which he introduced police employees to the philosophy of servant leadership through a series of workshops. He reported that his 48 study participants overwhelmingly embraced the servant leadership philosophy and agreed that “...servant leadership was a good fit for law enforcement in general.” He also reported observing positive ethical changes in the employee’s behaviour after the workshops.

The second doctoral dissertation was written by Badger (2017) who conducted a case study analysis on a Central California federal law enforcement agency office. Using focused interviews, he uncovered perceptions related to leadership, stress, and resiliency. Badger concluded that a positive correlation existed between three perceived servant leader behaviours (creating collaborative environments, promoting subordinate autonomy, and ethical and moral decision-making) and subordinates increased self-perception of resilience.

The final academic article located in this literature search was written by Warren (2012), who authored a “white paper” for a law enforcement leadership development program. Throughout the paper, Warren (2012) cites the work of Greenleaf (1977/2002) and other well-known leadership authors to make a case to include servant leadership in law enforcement leadership practice. Like Greenleaf, Warren singles out effective listening as the key competency of police servant leaders. He writes, “Listening and communicating will establish trust, keep problems from escalating, and can improve organizations” (p.6).

The remaining two servant leadership policing articles were located in peer reviewed academic journals. Vito, Suresh, & Richards (2011) studied the ideal leadership style of police managers in the United States by administering the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire–XII (Stogdill, 1963) to participants in the Administrative Officer Course at the Southern Police Institute during the 2007–2008 academic year. A total of 126 questionnaires were completed by police managers from 23 different US states. In the analysis of the survey data, the authors found statistically significant values that indicated, “These police leaders believe that the ideal police leader should express and follow the values of servant leadership” (p. 681).

The final journal article was an essay written by Williams (2017) and referred directly to servant leadership within the context of community policing. Although recently published, it appeared to have been written at least 10 years earlier. In the article, Williams identified where Greenleaf’s philosophy of servant leadership may link with the concept of community policing, and where it has points of conflict and tension. For example, he identified the concept of decentralized leadership found in local community police stations as a point of linkage with Greenleaf’s philosophy of a bottom-up, grass roots power structure.

According to Williams (2017), a place of conflict between servant leadership and community policing is found in the training that new police recruits receive at the police academy. He argued that the philosophy of community policing is not the dominant philosophy taught to recruits. He wrote, “Consequently, training reinforces the power differential between officers and citizens and buttresses an “us versus them” mentality” (p.70).

In conclusion, Williams described that part of the true test of servant leadership as devised by Greenleaf is its impact on the least privileged in society. He wrote, “Rooted in the spiritual world and embraced by the major religions, servant leadership represents a sacred vision of leadership that contrasts to the secular and carnal practice of community policing and public administration.” He continued:

“Consequently, we must continue to ponder whether public (secular) organizations should and can advance the sacred practice of servant leadership by considering their points of linkage and places of conflict and tension” (p.71).

Overall, this on-line literature review on servant leadership and policing revealed several key themes. First, there is clearly a need for additional empirical research on the subject of servant leadership and policing. Second, although the empirical research conducted by Cortrite (2007), Vito et al. (2011), and Badger (2017) contributed new evidence, they were localized studies, with each author calling for more research before validating or expanding their findings. Finally, none of the research located in this literature review focused on the Canadian policing context.

### Remaining Questions on Servant Leadership and Policing

Intuitively, the philosophy of servant leadership should be a natural fit for policing. Even junior police officers have an understanding of the philosophy of service—if not through the oath they take to serve and protect, then in the mottos found on the badges they wear: “To Serve and Protect” (Toronto Police Service); “Servamus” (Vancouver Police Department); and “Honour Through Service” (Victoria Police Department). Carrying the act of service into the practice of police leadership, with leaders striving to first serve the highest-order needs of their officers, is a concept that should resonate with most police supervisors and managers.

Moving forward, Crippen’s (2004) recommendations for advancing servant leadership in the field of education, modified for the profession of policing, are a helpful guide for Canadian police leaders beginning their task of rebuilding a new policing culture. These recommendations are:

1. Servant leadership requires further investigation to determine its viability as a viable model for Canadian policing.
2. If seen as a viable model, the servant leadership ethos should be introduced in police recruit training programs and included in all aspects of police leadership development to ensure the philosophy becomes an accepted part of the profession.
3. There is a need for research into Canadian police agencies to identify currently existing servant leadership practices and development programs.

With these recommendations in mind, the following questions for further research arise:

1. What theories of leadership currently underpin Canadian police leadership development programs?
2. Can the characteristics of servant leadership identified by Van Dierendonck (2011) be developed in existing or future police leaders?
3. If servant leadership characteristics can be developed, how would this be done?
4. What might an effective Canadian police servant leadership development program look like?

## CONCLUSIONS

This concept paper has identified that changes in the culture of Canadian police leadership are urgently required. As a first step, identifying alternative, courageous leadership approaches is highly recommended. Although much more exploration and research is required, the philosophy of servant leadership appears to hold some promise as a new police leadership ethos that may contribute to more respect and authentic inclusion in Canadian police agencies.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors state there are no conflicts of interest.

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