

## Summary of OLA Research

This summary is drawn from the book  
Leveraging the Power of Servant Leadership: Building High Performing Organizations  
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### Summary of Research findings from the OLA

#### Research Results

The OLA has been used in over 85 research studies, most of which are doctoral dissertation studies. In 2010, this author provided a summary of the research conducted up to that point coming from about one half of the current studies (Laub, 2010). In this article, we will update that summary to include the learning from this larger body of research to see what we have learned to date about servant leadership through the OLA.

The OLA has been used mostly in the United States, but also has been used for research in Brazil (Miguel, 2009), Bolivia (Chavez, 2012), Iran (Azadfada, Besmi & Doroudian, 2014), Saudi Arabia (Al-Yousef, 2012), Jordan (Salmeh, 2011), Turkey (Cerit, 2009), and Canada (Black, 2010). Currently the OLA instrument is available in the English, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, French, German, Icelandic and Dutch languages.

#### Studies in Different Organizational Settings

The OLA has been used for research studies in many different types of organizations as seen below in Figure 2. Most of the organizations studied are Higher Education, Education (Elementary, Middle and High Schools) and various types of Religious organizations. The OLA and the focus on the position levels of top leader, manager/supervisor and workforce apply to all kinds of organizations creating a consistent way to assess and view results.

**Table 2.** OLA studies in different types of organizations

Type of Organization	Study completed
Higher Education	Thompson (2002), Stamba (2003), Drury (2004), Iken (2005), Van Tassell (2006), Meredith (2007), Beaver, S. (2008), Hannigan (2008), Adamson (2009), McDougle (2009), Miguel (2009), Jacobs (2011), Palmer (2011), Chavez (2012), Padron (2012), Nyamboli (2014)
Law Enforcement	Ledbetter (2003), Freeman (2011)
Healthcare	Freitas (2003), Krebs (2005), Bradshaw (2007), Amadeo (2008), Wyllie (2009)
Education	Herbst (2003), Freitas (2003), Lambert (2004), Miers (2004), Anderson, K.P. (2005), Ross (2006), Anderson, J.D. (2006), Witter (2007), Svoboda (2008), Metzcar (2008), Cerit (2009),

	Black (2010), Salameh (2011), Babb (2012), McKenzie (2012), Shears (2012), Mortan (2013), Van Worth (2015)
Religious (Christian) Organizations	Anderson, K.P. (2005), Arfsten (2006), Ross (2006), McCann (2006), Witter (2007), Kong (2007), Beaver, T. (2007), Inbarasu (2008), McNeff (2012), Harless (2015)
Religious (Islamic) Organizations	Salie (2008)
Manufacturing/Industry	Rauch (2007)
Non-Profit Organizations	McCann (2006), Goodwin (2009)
High Tech Organizations	Johnson (2008)
Call Center	Chu (2008)
Residential Treatment	Bradshaw (2007)
U.S. Military	Kegler (2007)
Sports Teams	Azadfada (2014)
Credit Union	Ghormley (2009)
Distribution Center	Hodoh (2016)
Pharmaceutical organization	Krebs (2005)

### Studies in Different Organizational Settings

Several themes or topics have been studied using the OLA as identified in Table 3. By far the topic most studied is that of the relationship of servant leadership to employee job satisfaction. Other topics such as team effectiveness, spirit in organizations, organization and leader trust and student performance have allowed researchers to look at the relationship between servant leadership and these key organizational health factors.

**Table \_\_\_\_.** OLA studies on different themes/topics

Theme/Topic	Study completed
Women Leaders	Braye (2000)
Spirit in Organizations	Horsman (2001), Beazly (2002), Herman (2008)
Team Effectiveness	Irving (2005)
Organizational Safety	Krebs (2005)
Organizational Succession	Cater (2006)

Organizational Commitment	Drury (2004)
Social Enterprise	Klamon (2006)
Cultural Studies	Molnar (2007)
Emotional Intelligence	Johnson (2008)
Job Satisfaction	Laub (1999), Thompson (2002), Hebert (2003), Drury (2004), Miears (2004), Irving (2005), Anderson, K.P. (2005), Van Tassell (2006), Klamon (2006), Kong (2007), Svoboda (2008), Chu (2008), Johnson (2008), Amadeo (2008), Inbarasu (2008), Salie (2008), Cerit (2009), Wyllie (2009), Goodwin (2011), Al-Yousef (2012), McKenzie (2012), Wilson (2013), Mortan (2013), Azadfada (2014)
Organization and Leader Trust	Joseph & Winston (2005)
Employee Absenteeism & Attrition	Rauch (2007)
Volunteer Participation and Satisfaction	Ghormley (2009), Harless (2015)
Student performance	Herbst (2003), Lambert (2004), Shears (2012), Babb (2012)
Student Satisfaction	Padron (2012)
School Climate	Black (2010)
Employee Productivity	Hodoh (2016)
Core Self-Evaluation	Tischier, Giambatista, KeKeage, & McCormick (2015)
OLA and the LMX theory	Frietas (2003)
Female athlete satisfaction (Iran)	Azadfada (2014)
Teacher Effectiveness	Metzcar (2008), Jacobs (2011)
Teacher Job Satisfaction	McKenzie (2012), Shears (2012)
Perception Match between administrators and workforce	McDougle (2009)
Millennials and Effective Leadership	Nordbye (2012)
Board Leadership	Denning (2016)
Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)	Freitas (2003)

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Here is a summary of the key findings from the OLA research studies conducted to date.

## **Servant Leadership and Job Satisfaction**

Twenty-five studies have been conducted with the OLA on Job Satisfaction of employees (general), culturally diverse employees, teachers and athletes from multiple types of organizations. The results are consistent. Servant leadership is positively correlated to job satisfaction in all kinds of organizations. In the original study a significant ( $p < .01$ ) positive correlation of .653 was found (Laub, 1999, p.v).

Most of these studies were done using the 6-item OLA job satisfaction scale but others found similar results using the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ). “The Pearson correlation revealed that the total OLA scores and the MSQ score were significantly related,  $r(114) = +.704, p < .01, \text{two tails}$ ” (Thompson, 2002, p.72). Thompson went on to validate the OLA job satisfaction scale providing support for all of the additional studies on Job Satisfaction.

Servant leadership relates positively to job satisfaction among employees. When leaders build an organizational culture that values and develops people, provides and shares leadership, builds community and displays authenticity employees are more satisfied with their work and their role within the organization. This is a significant finding for encouraging servant leadership practice in our organizations. We want workers who are engaged in their work and with each other. We want workers who come to work with a sense of belonging, passion and challenge. We want workers who find their jobs satisfying and their organizations as satisfying places to work.

## **Servant Leadership and Team Effectiveness**

Servant leadership practice has shown a positive relationship with the effectiveness of team function in organizations (Irving, 2005; Irving & Longbotham, 2007). In these studies, the OLA was used along with the Team Effectiveness Questionnaire (Larson & LaFasto, 1989) to determine if this relationship does, in fact, exist. “A statistically significant and positive correlation was found for each of the variables associated with servant leadership and job satisfaction when analyzed in reference to team effectiveness (Irving, 2005, p. iii).”

In addition, “the Pearson  $r$  for the relationship between servant leadership at the organizational level ... and team effectiveness at the team level ... was .522. The  $p$  value for the Pearson  $r$  finding was .000 indicating that the finding was statistically significant. Additionally; when controlling for the effects of position, gender and level of education; the finds were similar ( $r = .527, p = .000$ )” (p.57). Based on these findings, Irving suggests that a mandate exists for leaders to pay attention to the level of servant leadership within their organization. The far reaching implications of team’s being more effective and productive is critical to overall organization success.

## **Servant Leadership and Student Achievement**

Studies conducted in secondary schools in the United States have sought to see if the level of servant leadership practiced relates to student performance on standardized tests. The indication from these studies indicates that it does. Three studies were conducted (Herbst, 2003, Lambert, 2004, Shears, 2012) on this topic. Lambert (2004) found that the “analysis of the data revealed a significant relationship between servant leadership of secondary school principals and gains in student achievement (p. v).”

Herbst (2003) studied 24 high schools in Broward County, Florida looking specifically at the relationship between the OLA score (servant leadership) and “the Florida Comprehensive Assessment test (FCAT) test scores in writing, reading, mathematics” among others scores. It was found that “in schools where greater degrees of servant leadership is being practiced students are achieving at a higher rate than in schools where lower degrees of servant leadership were found (p. 100).”

If servant leadership can create an environment within our schools to encourage higher student performance, shouldn't this be looked at more closely in terms of education reform? We pay attention to how teachers interact with students, and we should, but we also should be helping to build servant leadership cultures within our school organizations, from the Principal down through all levels of the school.

### **Servant Leadership and Employee Sustainability (attrition & absenteeism)**

Some may assume that servant leadership is only appropriate for people oriented organizations like education, religious groups or community service work, but a very interesting study conducted by Rauch (2007) shows that servant leadership can make a difference in other types of organizations as well. Rauch studied 28 manufacturing (automotive parts) locations from the same company located in the Midwestern, United States. This study involved 3896 completed OLA instruments with an 88.9% response rate. The research question was “to what extent are established manufacturing performance measures correlated with the presence of servant leadership?” (p.63)

Two key performance measures that relate to employee sustainability are absenteeism and attrition. On absenteeism; it was found that “as servant leadership increases, absenteeism rates generally decline. For example, locations with an OLA score of 2.5 had absenteeism rates of 3% to 10%, while locations with an OLA score of 4 had absenteeism rates of only 2% to 4%” (p. 82). On the topic of employee attrition it was found that the highest attrition rates occurred at locations with lower OLA scores (p. 84). It was found that those organizations with the highest OLA scores had attrition rates below the industry average while those organizations with the lowest OLA scores had rates above the industry average.

When the absenteeism and attrition scores are related to the OLA organizational health levels it was found that absenteeism decreases 41% for each increase in an organizational level and attrition decreases 22% for each increase in an organizational level. One of the key health factors in any organization is its ability to sustain workers; to keep them (low attrition) and to have them consistently present at work (low absenteeism). The presence of servant leadership has an inverse relationship to both of these organizational health factors suggesting that a servant-minded organization will do better at keeping good workers and keeping those workers present on a daily basis.

### **Servant Leadership and Employee Safety**

Might servant-led organizations create safer places for people to work? Krebs (2005) conducted a study to address “whether the existence of servant-leadership in an organization influences individuals' propensity to *actively care* for safety” (p. 94) thereby promoting beliefs and actions to engage in safe behaviors in the workplace. The results indicated that “a

significant, positive relationship was found between servant-leadership and actively caring” (p. 95) and further

“this study indicates that servant-leadership can be considered one of many safety indicators present in a given work environment and that its effects on safety are both direct and indirect. Thus, this research supports the notion that organizations may benefit from a safety perspective by utilizing servant-leadership as an espoused corporate leadership model. Organizations that include servant-leadership in its corporate and management practices would then not only be able to increase actively caring perceptions and behaviors, but may also be able to decrease accidents and near misses” (p. 114).

Rauch (2007) in contrast did not find that the recordable accident rate varied with changes in servant leadership and no relationship between the OLA score and Accident Severity rates were found. Certainly more research needs to be done in this important area of employee safety.

### **Servant Leadership and Trust**

Trust is crucial for healthy organizations to function well, both trust in the organization and trust in the leaders. Joseph and Winston (2005) conducted a study using the OLA and the Organizational Trust Inventory (OTI) to see if there is a relationship between servant leadership and trust. They utilized Nyhan and Marlowe’s definition of trust as “the level of confidence that one individual has in another’s competence and his or her willingness to act in a fair, ethical and predictable manner” (pp. 6-7). This powerful combination of competency and consistency allows workers to feel confident in doing their work knowing that their leaders can be trusted to do what is best. The study found that “perception of servant leadership correlated positively with both leader trust and organizational trust. The study also found that organizations perceived as servant-led exhibited higher levels of both leader trust and organizational trust than organizations perceived as non-servant” (p. 6).

### **Servant Leadership and School Climate**

Black (2010) used the OLA along with the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire-Revised (OCDQ-RE) to reveal a significant positive correlation between servant leadership and school climate within Catholic elementary schools in Canada. Black states that “previous research supports the concept that a positive school climate influences student achievement. In a culture of faith-centered education, Catholic school leaders can influence the school’s climate and student achievement by adopting the theory of servant leadership to guide their behavior” (pp. 461-462).

Lambert (2004) looked at the issue of servant leadership, student learning and school climate in secondary schools in Florida school districts in the United States finding “a significant relationship between servant leadership ... and gains in student achievement. An even stronger relationship was shown to exist between servant leadership and school climate. Further, when controlling for socioeconomic status, school climate correlated strongly with student achievement in lower socioeconomic schools” (p. v).

### **Servant Leadership and Employee Core Self-Evaluation**

A 2016 study by Tischler, Giambatista, McKeage and McCormick looked at servant leadership and core self-evaluation which is defined as “a self-concept measure with four components of self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, (internal) locus of control and (low) neuroticism or emotional stability” (p. 3). The authors suggest that identifying a relationship between servant leadership and core self-evaluation is critical because this would “confirm that servant leadership affects important changes in employees as people” (p. 1) and this is one of the central tenets of the servant leadership concept. In servant leadership the focus is on the followers and the belief is that if the followers grow and become stronger people and workers that the organization will benefit. In fact, it is this focus on the follower first that provides one of the best distinctions between servant leadership and transformational leadership (Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2004). This 2016 study of three different organizations found that “servant leadership predicts both core self-evaluation and job satisfaction” (p. 1). This predictive relationship supports the contention that servant leadership helps to produce positive changes within individuals. This study also confirms the many studies that have shown a strong and positive relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction. Studies by Judge and Bono found that core self-evaluation is positively correlated to job performance (Judge & Bono, 2001).

The OLA was used with the Core Self-evaluation Scale (CSES) and conducted a regression analysis to test whether servant leadership predicts core self-evaluation. It was found that “across three firms, servant leadership was positively correlated with job satisfaction ( $r = .80, p < .001$ ) and core self-evaluation ( $r = .50, p < .001$ )” (Tischler et al., 2016, p. 11).

## **Servant Leadership and Employee Productivity Scores**

Hodoh (2016) conducted a study in three for-profit distribution centers of a national supply chain company to see if a relationship existed between servant leadership and individual worker productivity. The OLA was used along with the Total Productivity Model (TPM) scale.

“Results from the regression analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between participants individual productivity scores and overall servant leadership behavior ( $R = .628, R^2 = .395, F(1,131) = 85.486, p < .001$ ).” (p. vi) Hodoh concludes that team productivity is positively and significantly affected by servant leadership within the work environment. It was also discovered that “there was a significant positive relationship between participant’s team productivity and the OLA servant leadership subscale of *value people* ( $p < .001$ ).

## **Research Summary**

What are we discovering from this body of research, and what do we still need to learn? We are finding out that the presence of servant leadership characteristics within organizations correlates positively with key organizational health factors, such as:

- Employee Job Satisfaction
- Trust in leaders and organizations
- Organizational safety
- Team Effectiveness
- Student Achievement Scores

We also know that the presence of servant leadership correlates negatively to employee absenteeism and attrition. The more that servant leadership characteristics are perceived in the organization, the less our employees are absent from the job and the less they tend to leave the organization. This is critical for organizational performance due to the high cost of making up for lost employee production due to absences and retraining for newly filled positions. If we can keep our employees longer, have them present on the job more, keep them safer, provide a more satisfying work experience, build trust between employees and their leaders and provide for stronger performance we need to do so.