The Case for Servant Leadership Executive Peer Advisory Groups

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Abstract

Executive leadership is facing a time of significant challenge and complexity. Numerous sociological and technological advances are driving the complexity, making it necessary for leaders to discover solutions to meet new challenges. This paper sets out to review the value of executive peer advisory groups (EPAGs), the theoretical symbiotic relationship between servant leadership and EPAGs, and the associated competitive advantage for leaders and organizations. There is no serious question about the need for better leadership development. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the most successful and creative organizations employ the best leaders. EPAGs are powerful but often untapped leadership development modalities. Evidence suggests that EPAGs are a more efficient model for developing vital leadership skills, including effective active listening, emotional intelligence, and employee engagement. In a peer advisory group, participants exchange roles from leader to follower as needed so as to serve one another. This article considers what leaders might do to gain a competitive advantage in an uncertain world. Our premise is based on peer-reviewed evidence arguing that a community of servant leaders, created through the formation of a servant-leader-focused EPAG, accelerates the character development of servant leaders. Leadership behaviors guide actions, but a leader's character determines how and if the leader acts. Servant leadership development from peers accelerates the learning cycle by developing vital cognitive, behavioral, and emotional capacities. Character and community hold the key to unlocking the competitive advantage through the symbiotic relationship in the EPAG.

Key Words: executive development, peer advisory groups, community, character, servant leadership

Executive leadership is facing a time of significant challenge and complexity. Numerous sociological and technological advances are driving the complexity, making it necessary

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for leaders to discover solutions to meet new challenges. Change is increasingly present and difficult for leaders. A global study of 32,000 people revealed that few people in society are willing to help, work with, and live near people whom they disagree with on things important to them (Edelman, 2023). There are many red flags in the workplace. In another recent study, 2 out of 10 employees rated their mental health as fair or poor, 5 out of 10 noted they are quietly quitting by doing the minimum required to get by, and only 3 out of 10 indicated they are engaged (Gallup, 2023). Another survey of executive leaders revealed the challenges they face are likely larger than perceived. The majority of executives surveyed indicated they believed their teams have psychological safety; however, when their teams were surveyed, the evidence suggested that only 43% of team members experienced a positive team climate at work, only 30% saw a reason to say something when they see something is wrong, and only 30% believed their opinion counted (McKinsey & Company, 2021). There is no serious question about the need for better leadership development. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the most successful and creative organizations employ the best leaders. Although leadership development is essential, especially during turbulent times, it is not sufficient. Executive peer advisory groups (EPAGs) are powerful but often untapped leadership development modalities. This paper sets out to review the value of EPAGs, the theoretical symbiotic relationship between servant leadership and EPAGs, and the associated competitive advantage for leaders and organizations.

Executive Peer Advisory Groups

Executive peer advisory groups (EPAGs) are described broadly as groups of business leaders that develop strong relationships to discuss shared experiences and provide feedback to each other (Shapiro, 2017). EPAGs are a medium for people with senior managerial and leadership responsibility in organizations to come together with the purpose of accelerating their learning and growth through shared experiences. Typically, EPAGs emphasize confidentiality (Alvey & Barclay, 2007). EPAGs are small groups of individuals that mutually develop one another with similar interests where they cultivate trust, communicate transparently, and are characterized by emotional safety (non-competing) around similarly operationally complex companies.

Peer advisory groups can be traced to Benjamin Franklin's Leather Apron Club in 1727 (Benjamin Franklin Historical Society, 2014; Feghali, 2022). The group was established as a collection of thought leaders to provide a structured forum for mutual improvement. Members came from the same geographic area of Philadelphia but had diverse educational and experiential backgrounds.

EPAGs are structured and often led by an external coach or mentor or facilitated by internal peer advisory group members. There are three basic types of EPAGs: (a) open, (b) closed, or (c) sponsor (Shaner & Maznevski, 2006). Open EPAGs typically comprise

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members based on professional criteria (e.g., industry, size of business). Closed EPAGs are typically not led by an external coach/facilitator but by an EPAG member. Sponsor EPAGs are formed by the sponsor and likely do not have existing connections. Closed and sponsored EPAGs promote exclusivity. Critical to all types of EPAGs are trust, vulnerability, and confidentiality.

It is widely accepted that others impact individual performance. Hardy (2012) argued that much of individual success or failure is attributed to people with whom they habitually associate. According to Durkin (2012), EPAG benefits include empathy, objectivity from external points of view, shared learning, trust, accountability, improved decision-making, strategic direction, confidence, comradery, and improved work-life balance. According to a study by Sgourev and Zuckerman (2006) at MIT Sloan, 100% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that membership in an EPAG improved their company performance, and 100% obtained new knowledge.

Given the contemporary virtual workplace, asking if EPAGs should use virtual platforms is not really a meaningful question. Instead, a better question is whether or not quality relationships can be developed through technology (Doolittle, 2022). Evidence suggests that virtual coaching leads to significantly higher transfer of training, improved goal definition, work-life balance, and clear priorities (Cornelius et al., 2009; Wang & Wentling, 2001). Also, the benefits of virtual formats include accessibility for geographically distributed audiences and affordability from reduced travel requirements. Although the benefits of virtual coaching are advantageous, the research does not support replacing face-to-face interactions with virtual EPAG meetings.

Servant Leadership and Contemporary Leadership Comparisons

The complex and globally diverse modern workplace desperately needs a new leadership approach (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012; Trompenaars & Voerman, 2010). Servant leadership is an effective leadership style for contemporary business challenges. It is no longer acceptable for corporate leadership to be blind to their followers' needs and the communities where they live and work (Spears, 1998). According to Ready et al. (2020), modern leaders need help leading a complex workforce in today's digital marketplace. People are looking for leaders who understand how to help remove barriers that impact meeting their needs (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2010). Servant leadership fosters a mindset oriented to serving others first. Today's world is too chaotic not to deepen understanding of how servant leaders think, act, and feel.

A literature review points to an agreement on the importance of leadership in organizations (Yukl, 2006). According to Bennis (1959), "probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than about any other topic in the behavioral sciences" (pp. 259–260). In a review of more than 26,000 leadership articles, Winston

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and Patterson (2006) compared the literature to blind men describing an elephant and each only describing parts of leadership.

Servant leadership, an emerging 20th century leadership theory, solves today's dilemmas (Northouse, 2016). According to Greenleaf and Spears (2002), a "servant-leader is servant first" (p. 27). Spears (1998) identified 10 characteristics foundational to servant leadership: (a) listening to self and others, (b) empathy, (c) healing self and others, (d) awareness, (e) persuasion, (f) conceptual thinking, (g) foresight, (h) stewardship of others' needs, (i) commitment to people development, and (j) building community. Patterson (2003) posited seven constructs associated with a leader's focus on serving followers: "love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service" (p. 7). Greenleaf, attributed by most as the founder of servant leadership, described it with a test:

The best test, and difficult to administer, is: 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, will they not be further deprived. (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002, p. 27)

Leadership behaviors alone are insufficient in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous marketplace. Behaviors direct what a leader is likely to do, and a leader's moral virtues govern what a leader will do. There is both an inner and outer game of leadership (Anderson & Adams, 2016). The leader's inner-game virtues quietly control the leader's outer-game behaviors. Evidence suggests that higher character ratings result in net asset returns nearly five times those rated lower (Kiel, 2015).

According to Northouse (2016), contemporary leadership theories include servant leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership. Comparing the motivations and dimensions of these emerging leadership theories reveals similarities and differences that contribute to a deeper understanding of servant leadership.

Servant Leadership and Transformational Leadership

While similar to servant leadership, the primary focus of transformational leadership is the organizational benefit (Bass, 2000). Servant leadership focuses on service to the follower (Patterson, 2003). Table 1 displays the motivations and dimensions of servant leadership and transformational leadership.

Table 1
Servant Leadership Theory Compared to Transformational Leadership Theory

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Attribute	Servant Leadership	Transformational Leadership
Motivation	To serve others first and lead second	To help followers perform beyond expectation for the benefit of the organization
Dimension	Love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service	Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration

Note. This table reflects the attributes of motivation and dimension for both servant leadership and transformational leadership adapted from Fry (2003), Greenleaf and Spears (2002), and Patterson (2003).

Servant Leadership and Authentic Leadership

In contrast to servant leadership, authentic leadership focuses on the leader being who they were created to be (George, 2003). Authentic and servant leadership overlap in dimensions of leading with the heart and humility. The critical difference between these two contemporary leadership approaches is the difference in the leader's focus on themselves for authentic leadership and others for servant leadership. Table 2 displays the motivations and dimensions of servant leadership and authentic leadership.

Table 2

Servant Leadership Theory Compared to Authentic Leadership Theory

Attribute	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership
Motivation	To serve others first and lead second	To be the person, the leader was created to be
Dimension	Love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service	Purpose, values, leading with heart, relationships, self-discipline, and humility

Note. This table reflects the attributes of motivation and dimension for both servant leadership and authentic leadership adapted from Bass (2000), George (2003), Greenleaf and Spears (2002), and Patterson (2003).

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Servant Leadership Benefits

There are several well-researched employee and company benefits associated with servant leadership, such as (a) improved performance, (b) improved productivity, (c) enhanced intrinsic motivation, (d) increased organizational citizenship behavior, (e) enhanced organizational alignment, (f) improved workplace climate, (g) enhanced employee capacity, (h) improved creativity, and many more (Becchetti et al., 2013; Ferris, 1988; Patterson, 2003; Shu, 2015; Walumbwa et al., 2010). According to Winston and Fields (2015), the behaviors of servant leadership fall into "conceptual skills, empowering employees, helping subordinates grow, putting subordinates first, behaving ethically, emotional healing and creating community value" (p. 424).

A servant leader's selfless love for followers is a benefit multiplier. Evidence suggests that selfless love increases leader and follower commitment, yielding enhanced intrinsic motivation that amplifies workforce and business strategy alignment (Ferris, 1988). Intrinsic motivation is also a moderating factor in employee engagement. It improved intrinsic motivation, resulting in higher levels of employee engagement (Shu, 2015). According to Patterson (2003), higher levels of intrinsic motivation influence people to increase performance.

In addition to enhancing what leaders expect, servant leadership unlocks the unexpected. Discretionary effort, also known as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), is increased by servant leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2010). For example, consider two employees walking down a hall. Both employees see a piece of paper on the floor. Only one employee stops to pick it up, even though it is neither employee's responsibility. Servant leadership enhances the workplace climate, increases discretionary effort (unexpected worthy behaviors), and improves business results.

No organization looks to stay the same year after year. Innovation is necessary to remain relevant and succeed in a fast-paced digital marketplace. Evidence suggests that a servant leadership style improves employee productivity and creativity (Ferris, 1988). Employees are more likely to provide constructive criticism and engage in productive conflict without fear of exclusion or retaliation (Doolittle, 2023). It is in this environment that employees can be creative.

SERVE Group Model and Framework

The SERVE group model and framework were created to enhance the efficacy of EPAGs through the intentional integration of servant leadership. SERVE is an acronym for: (a) servant leadership, (b) ethics, (c) results, (d) vision, and (e) excellence. This provides a framework that produces the results organizations and leaders need. The SERVE model (see Figure 1) balances the development of organizational, relational, and follower

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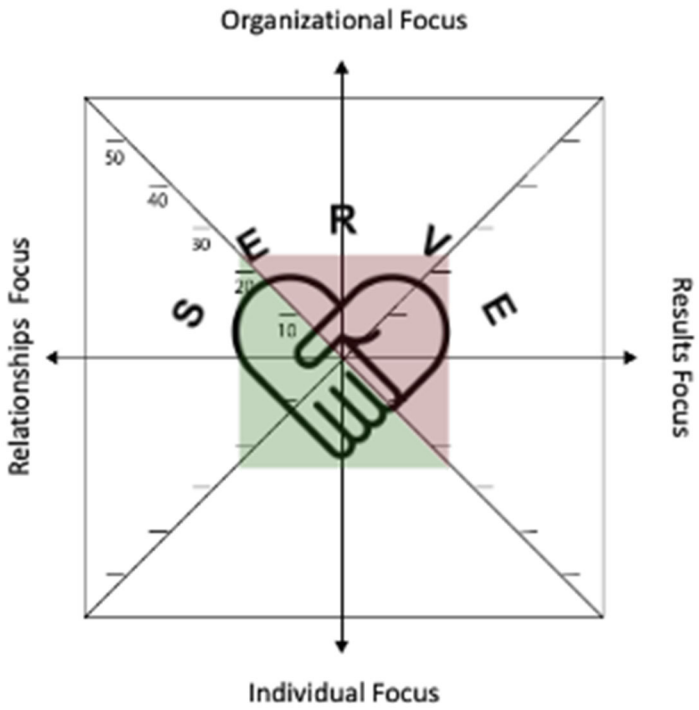
needs while maintaining the results needed to sustain the common good. When the elements of the SERVE framework are practiced in community, members balance organizational and individual foci as well as relational needs and organizational results. Each aspect of the model balances and enhances one another.

Figure 1

SERVE Model



In principle, the near-universal openness of executives to change from peer input in an EPAG should transform more effectively following the principles of servant leadership practiced in a community (McGee-Cooper & Trammell, 2010; Olmsted, 2019). The goal of the peer group is to help and be helped by peers who understand one another and have similar experiences. Moreover, it follows that if intentionally practicing servant leadership meets followers' needs, practicing it with others will better meet their needs than serving them without intentional servant leadership practices (Mayer, 2010).

Character is critical in leadership development because "leadership is always an ethical enterprise," and character is a person's moral nature (Ciulla, 2014, p. 40; Crisp & Honderich, 2005, p. 134). It is reasonable to infer that as the pressures of change occur and press upon a leader during follower and organizational transformation, an increase in leadership development must occur to maintain the ability to lead without moral

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failure. In other words, for a leader to lead well, the leader's character must improve and obtain the moral character needed to maintain the direction of followers virtuously. Additionally, developing character, as Aristotle described hundreds of years ago, begins by observing and reflecting on the actions of others before we try them out (Ciulla, 2014). Thus, ethical observation and reflection place the inner game of self-leadership (Anderson & Adams, 2016) as part of the character development process.

Community is required to sustain virtuous character, so leaders who wish to develop should seek a network of sages to play the role of moral mentors (Morris, 1997). Part of the role of the community is to help leaders overcome the tendency to self-deceive by providing another viewpoint, which can be simulated in part by using a trained imagination. Family-owned businesses prefer the community of a peer group for development (Wittmer et al., 2021). Formation happens over time as the moral character of one's community models behaviors its members will imitate (Ciulla, 2014), so leaders ought to ensure the members of their developmental communities have the virtue required for their desired outcome.

Servant Leadership

The foundational characteristics of servant leadership align to support the purpose of EPAGs. Ninety percent of servant leadership characteristics identified by Spears (1998) closely align with the framework of EPAGs: (a) listening to self and others, (b) empathy, (c) healing self and others, (d) awareness, (e) conceptual thinking, (f) foresight, (g) stewardship of other's needs, (h) commitment to people development, and (i) building community. Practicing servant leadership within the EPAG community orients members to provide feedback and meet each other's needs. Also, the servant leader's moral constructs of love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service produce outcomes of trust, vulnerability, and confidentiality among members, which are essential to the success of EPAGs.

Within a servant leadership framework, EPAGs do not ascribe to a one-dimensional opposites mindset. Servant leadership is a leadership style that unlocks many options for members when approaching workplace dilemmas and naturally orients members toward serving first (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2010). Organizations have many dilemmas, such as cost versus quality or results versus relationships. Leadership creates dilemmas between right and right. Some perceive dilemmas as opposites, but servant leadership, instead, adopts holistic thinking and views opposites as mutually interdependent. Servant leadership amplifies a fundamental shift in thinking to leverage differences. Rather than considering collective group diversity and the differences in their workplace challenges as opposites, servant leadership encourages cyclical thinking among the group to reveal creative solutions. Instead of applying analysis thinking that breaks apart challenges by looking at the pieces individually,

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servant leadership promotes a mindset of synthesis thinking that enables an appreciative approach to putting ideas and information together to see patterns of how things come together, amplifying EPAG outcomes.

Additionally, the practice of servant leadership in an EPAG positively reinforces the formation of servant leadership habits among members. Social facilitation is a psychological concept referring to the tendency of others to influence a person's performance on a task (Aiello & Douthitt, 2001). The co-action effect of social facilitation is thought to improve members' drive and ability to focus while performing (Feinberg & Aiello, 2006). The presence of supportive EPAG members aids the practice of servant leadership habits.

Ethics

Regarding ethics, it is vital to recognize that executive members of peer groups want and need moral improvement. In *Meno*, Plato (1997) wondered if ethics is the kind of thing that could be taught. Like *Meno*, business leaders are motivated to become more ethical, but for executives, unethical behavior destroys the productivity required to succeed in the global marketplace (McMahone, 2012). Intellectual knowledge of ethics, as a discipline, needs to be improved to develop the moral character in the lives of practical executives, as evidenced by the average moral performance of ethics professors (Schwitzgebel & Rust, 2011). The task of ethics is not to master ethics case studies, but to "find a reason or basis on which to stand to enable you not to do what you want to do" (Willard, 2016, p. 71). Ethical living is an inside job within human hearts, moving in opposition to human selfishness. Self-aware EPAG members know that ethics are needed for personal formation, and executives know, in principle, ethics are critical for professional purposes, but the challenge is effective implementation, especially to develop the foundational disposition of love where one wills the good of another (Willard, 2002, p. 130).

The ethical leader needs to practice and habituate ethical behaviors that create self-integrity for the leader and members as individuals, healthy relationships of the members, and a good and desirable goal for the group. Lewis (2009) represents these three areas of ethics as ships. First, each individual ship needs integrity (see Figure 2, single green ship) to keep individual boats afloat. Second, the ships must maintain healthy relationships with one another so as not to crash into one another (see Figure 2, blue ships in formation). Third, the intended destination (see Figure 2, red compass) must be reached by the fleet to consider it successful. For example, Cozumel is beautiful, but the trip would only succeed if Costa Rica were the destination. Skill in these three areas creates ethical harmony (see Figure 2), maintaining virtue both individually and organizationally by avoiding unhealthy false dilemmas and balancing relationships with results.

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Servant leadership chooses the good of another first (Patterson, 2003). However, servant leaders must still act within a range of ethical harmony. Suppose a servant leader CEO gives raises to all the employees for their good but destroys the company. Thus, raises are only for the good of the individuals within the boundaries of the health of the organization as a whole—the common good. However, the consideration framework begins with the desire to serve the individual first rather than mere organizational health of selective stakeholder priority.

Figure 2

Ethical Harmony Structures

Essential to EPAG members is the ability to experience moral formation and reliably develop good character. As the ethical aspects of the SERVE group are structured in ethical harmony, they are animated and motivated by love, for love is the foundational virtue. "Love is always directed at what is good. You love something if you are set to advance what is good for it" (Willard, 2016, p. 71). Virtue-based models of servant leadership, like Patterson's (2003), feature ethical character attributes that guide servant leaders and their followers toward human flourishing. The compassionate love needed to drive ethical formation is at the heart of servant leaders (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). In short, the virtue of love developed in, by, and for a SERVE group will foster the impulse to serve as servant leaders and the ethical character desired for effective EPAGs.

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Results

Compelling evidence suggests that leadership moderates company performance and results. The best and brightest leaders populate the most successful organizations. Executives who join EPAGs want to grow as individuals and create economic value for their organization. Staying on track and accountable is a significant challenge facing executives in contemporary, fast-paced digital organizations. It is lonely at the top, and isolation threatens individual and organizational success.

EPAG members work individually and in the community toward achieving inspiring and challenging goals with peer accountability and support. EPAGs help members set the right goals and remain accountable toward those goals through the lens of shared experience. Also, servant leadership produces increased intrinsic motivation and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Through the practice of servant leadership in the EPAG, higher levels of member intrinsic motivation, productivity, and engagement are expected to result in contributions beyond EPAG membership expectations (Shu, 2015; Walumbwa et al., 2010).

Developing EPAG member character benefits members and organizations. Several studies demonstrate proven benefits associated with virtues and character development in leaders produced with servant leadership. Kiel (2015) conducted a study involving CEOs from US companies to understand the connection between character and return on assets. Leaders rated high on the four character dimensions of integrity, responsibility, forgiveness, and compassion had a return on assets of nearly five times those rated low. Chun (2017) found significant positive correlations in a large-scale empirical study on the influence of virtues on employee and customer identification, distinctiveness, and satisfaction. Donada et al. (2019) found evidence that virtues had a more substantial positive significance on organizational performance than organizational management control systems. Ruiz-Palomino et al. (2013) found that virtues in an ethical culture positively influence the person-to-organization fit, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intent to stay.

Vision

Vision within servant leadership holds the individual's future logically and axiologically prior to the organization (Patterson, 2003). This means if the good of an individual conflicts with the organization, the choice will be for the good of the individual, given ethical harmony. For example, an EPAG member is doing a great job leading an organization but is personally languishing. The EPAG would foresee a better future for the member and encourage succession planning and a path towards flourishing for the leader, even at the risk of diminishing the organization. Arguably, the good of the organization would be enhanced by a leader who would flourish

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leading; so, the flourishing of the organization's followers and the languishing leader are best served by a change in leadership. Such foresight practiced by SERVE groups begins with the good of the member with an understanding of the potential future good but rejects the false dilemma opposing individual good against organizational good.

Moreover, vision fills the hearts of EPAG members with hope through the good and desirable end envisioned for the member. Hope theory suggests that EPAGs will develop the traits needed to obtain the visions cast by a SERVE group when members understand their goals, agency, and pathways (Lopez, 2014). A good goal drives the vision, agency empowers the member to make choices to obtain the goal, and pathways anticipate barriers and difficulties and the potential of many ways to obtain the goal. Further, hope drives action with a growth mindset, compelling action toward the desirable end goal (Dweck, 2008). Hope heals, activates achievement, and fortifies resilience (Kouzes & Posner, 2011) in the process of making a vision a reality.

Excellence

Excellence is commonly measured in terms of growth, financial performance, and better services and products within the workplace. Excellence is being the very best. In a climate where executives are frequently expected to do more with less, it is easy to fall into the trap of tolerating lower standards. The pursuit of excellence sharpens individual and organizational performance. Vince Lombardi (2003), considered by many to be the greatest coach and one of the greatest leaders in American sports history, made popular a saying that the pursuit of perfection leads to excellence.

Servant Leadership practiced within the EPAG prioritizes continuous development and challenging the status quo. Servant leadership enhances high-quality, trust-based relationships where each EPAG member feels valued and safe to contribute within an open environment (Patterson, 2003). Trust and collaboration are fundamental to excellence, as they contribute to the willingness of EPAG members to take risks, dare to disagree, and hold each other accountable. Through humility, transparency, and a desire to serve one another, members' expectations, goals, and commitment to serve are fostered in a climate of accountability, critical for excellence. Servant leadership in the context of the EPAG compels member responsibility for achieving higher standards.

A practical leadership approach to achieving excellence in the workplace accepts that it can only be achieved through others. Every organizational result is the contribution of someone somewhere doing something (Doolittle, 2023). However, challenging the status quo in most organizations is risky. Igniting a spark within others is a key to achieving individual and organizational excellence. Empowerment promotes the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary to take risks. Leaders cannot control every situation or outcome, and followers with intrinsic motivation persist against complex

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and ambiguous work. Encouraging followers to take initiative with tasks increases psychological ownership, leading to a sense of responsibility and positive workplace behaviors. The moral constructs of love and trust are fundamental to servant leadership and igniting excellence within the EPAG framework because of member differences rather than despite them.

Conclusion

Executives invest time and resources in peer groups as they serve one another and will enhance their ability to serve as group members through the intentional integration of servant leadership through the SERVE framework. Moreover, the qualities and character executives seek to develop in such groups are inherently a part of servant leadership. Servant leaders need encouragement, models, and practical ideas offered in EPAGs to persevere through the difficulties they endure while serving as leaders in their respective contexts. Although the research, as mentioned earlier, supports the leader's needs through the principles of the SERVE model, the practice of the SERVE model has yet to be studied and supported by either qualitative or quantitative studies. More groups need to apply the SERVE group model and appropriate data collected, perhaps using the executive servant leadership assessment (Reed et al., 2011).

About the Author

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