

“Shared accountability”

Experiences of employees in a servant leadership organization guided by growth

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Abstract

Despite the fact that many organizations attribute their success to the practice of servant leadership, only a few studies have been conducted to understand the experience of employees working for a devoted servant leadership organization. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore the lived experience of employees who work in an organization that has been committed to the practice of servant leadership for decades. To respond to the research question: What is it like for employees to work in a dedicated employee-owned servant leadership organization in the construction industry and facilities services business, 16 interviews were conducted, including six follow-up interviews. Half of the interviewees held management positions and the other half held non-management positions, and they had worked for the organization from two years to 50 years. The organization operates in the United States of America and offers services from engineering and construction to operations and maintenance. The interviews were analyzed and interpreted according to phenomenological methodology. Three themes emerged: “Not just the work life but your whole self,” “The sky is the limit”: Continuous growth of employees and the organization, and “Diverse minds make better decisions.” The findings demonstrate that the employees are dedicated to a balanced growth of the organization and its employees as they experience the practice of servant leadership as a holistic way to continually help each other to develop and grow the business, by building on shared accountability leading to employee satisfaction and positive organizational performance. The findings indicate that dedication to the continuous and balanced growth of the organization and its employees is the foundation of the practice of servant leadership.

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1 Introduction

Servant leadership is a leadership philosophy that Robert K. Greenleaf introduced in 1970 and was further presented in later publications (1977, 2002). Servant leadership is a holistic leadership approach (Eva et al., 2019) that includes a unique way of leading through serving (Carter and Baghurst, 2014), and willingness to serve others is central to the philosophy (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Based on Greenleaf's writings, the core elements of servant leadership are *sincere interest in other people*, meaning that a servant leader is a servant first, demonstrated by the ability to empower others and to help them to grow; *self-knowledge*, referring to the ability of servant leaders to know their own strengths and weaknesses through awareness, reflection, and humility; and *foresight and clear vision*, referring to the ability of a servant leader to provide focus, direction, shared purpose, and accountability (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2018). The first two core elements are considered the *servicing* part of servant leadership, while the third is considered the *leading* part of servant leadership (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2018).

Although many organizations use servant leadership to achieve their objectives (Glashagel, 2009) and interest in servant leadership is increasing among academics and practitioners (Carter and Baghurst, 2014; Ragnarsson et al., 2018), there is still a need for a better understanding of how employees in dedicated servant leadership organizations experience and strategically practice servant leadership (Liao et al., 2021; Parris and Peachey, 2013; Ragnarsson et al., 2018). Nowadays, there is a growing concern about employee dissatisfaction and burnout as many organizations seem to focus more on achieving financial results and serving stockholders as compared to attending to the well-being of employees.

However, increasing evidence points to the usefulness of servant leadership in helping to deal with the challenges facing modern workplaces (Eva et al., 2019) by making a positive impact on employees and their organizations (Kaltainen and Hakanen, 2022; Khan et al., 2022; Langhof and Guldenberg, 2020; Xiu et al., 2023). The usefulness of servant leadership is also reflected in reports about numerous organizations claiming to practice servant leadership to achieve their visions and goals of employee satisfaction and organizational success, such as Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Synovus Financial, TDIndustries, and Zappos.com (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011). For instance, according to Colleen Barrett, former CEO of Southwest Airlines, and James H. Blanchard, former CEO of Synovus Financial, these two organizations have the primary goal of ensuring employee satisfaction by putting the interests of their employees ahead of the interests of other stakeholders but, nevertheless, this has also led to organizational success (Blanchard and Broadwell, 2018).

Despite the growing number of studies presenting the usefulness of servant leadership, there are limited number of studies about the practice of servant leadership in the business sector (Ragnarsson et al., 2018), especially among employee-owned companies. For these reasons, it is important to explore how a committed and employee-owned servant leadership organization follows the principles of servant leadership.

This study highlights the lived experience of employees working in an employee-owned construction and facilities service business organization with a long-standing dedication to servant leadership. The participating organization, Bewo [a pseudonym of the organization], is presented in section 3. The main objective of the study is to gain insight into employee experiences to better understand the application of servant leadership within a servant leadership organization. As such, we aimed to answer the following research question:

What is it like for employees to work in a dedicated employee-owned servant leadership organization in the construction industry and facilities services business?

We have organized the remainder of the article as follows. First, we review the relevant literature, and then we explain the phenomenological methodology. Next, we present our findings, followed by a discussion and conclusion of those findings, including theoretical and practical implications.

2 Servant leadership

Servant leadership is about providing leadership while at the same time serving others (Buchen, 1998; Farling et al., 1999; Kahl, 2004). Originally, servant leadership was described as a leadership philosophy that valued service to others over self-interests (Barbuto and Hayden, 2011) with the focus on followers (Greenleaf, 1970; Zarei et al., 2022) and a special focus on the welfare and growth of people (Greenleaf, 2002). Servant leaders serve by showing care and compassion for people (Russell and Stone, 2002); they are able to self-sacrifice and be humble. In addition, they want to help their followers by creating a fair community and adopting a clear vision, purpose, and foresight, which is the lead part that each servant leader needs to have (Greenleaf, 2002). Greenleaf described the essence of servant leadership as follows: "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (1970, p. 15). Thus, by definition, servant leadership includes serving and leading (van Dierendonck, 2011). These aspects cannot be separated from one another, but a servant leader is a servant first as serving is supposed to precede leading (Prosser, 2010).

In servant leadership, people work together to build and maintain communities and one of the main roles of the servant leader is building a community consisting of an environment in which people can grow and blossom (Greenleaf, 2002). Through their contribution to the community (Liden et al., 2014; Toor and Ofori, 2009), servant leaders distinguish themselves from other types of leaders (Sun, 2013) as they aim to sustain an environment of fairness and effective collaboration (Irving and Longbotham, 2007). Amicable and human relationships are considered important aspects of servant leadership. For instance, a model by Liden et al., (2015) includes a dimension of *emotional healing*, highlighting that servant leaders care about people's personal problems and well-being. Similarly, Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) presented *emotional healing* as a characteristic of servant leaders which they use to create a work environment in which it is safe for people to communicate about work and personal issues. This builds on Greenleaf's (2002) seminal writings about how servant leader aims to establish a community where people can develop, feel valued, and create value for the community by building strong relationships, collaborating with others, and valuing the differences of others (Mittal and Dorfman, 2012).

Servant leadership focuses on employees' well-being, including their general well-being and family life (Tang et al., 2016). This is witnessed in the willingness of servant leaders to attend to family matters of fellow employees (Gandolfi and Stone, 2018) and enable employees to transfer positive values and behaviors from the workplace to their homes (Qureshi et al., 2019). In this line, studies have shown that servant leadership positively relates to work-to-family enrichment (Zhang et al., 2012), influences people's satisfaction with their personal and work lives (Hakanen and van Dierendonck, 2011), as a holistic approach and a way of life (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016; Greenleaf, 1998).

Several models of servant leadership have been published. For instance, Liden et al., (2015) identified seven dimensions of servant leadership in their aforementioned model: 1) *emotional healing*: the level of care that the leader has for followers' personal problems and well-being; 2) *creating value for the community*: the leader's involvement in contributing to the organization's community and encouraging the involvement of followers; 3) *conceptual skills*: the leader's competency in solving work problems and understanding the organization's goals; 4) *empowering*: the leader's trust in followers regarding things such as responsibility and autonomy; 5) *helping subordinates grow and succeed*: the help the leader gives followers to achieve their full potential and succeed at work; 6) *putting subordinates first*: the leader's emphasis on meeting followers' needs before attending to his/her own needs; and 7) *behaving ethically*: which involves things such as being honest and trustworthy and demonstrating integrity.

2.1 The holistic approach in servant leadership

Two of the main influences on Greenleaf's idea of servant leadership came from E. B. White's writings on the importance of seeing things as a whole and seeing the big picture (Greenleaf, 1998) and from Hermann Hesse's story, *The Journey to the East*, in which a character named Leo took care of all the needs of travelers on their journey (Greenleaf, 2008). "Seeing things whole" (Greenleaf, 2003, p. 245) is a concept about seeing and contributing to the wholeness of individuals as well as organizations and society (McClellan, 2008); servant leaders focus on understanding the big picture (Sipe and Frick, 2009) and employ a holistic leadership approach (Eva et al., 2019). As such, servant leaders are systems thinkers who recognize and study the whole system, giving them an overview of that system and an understanding of the big picture (Jaworski, 1997; Sipe and Frick, 2009).

Systems thinking is based on perceiving the world as a whole or the holism principle (Ackoff, 1999), which can be traced to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who stated that single parts of our body only make sense in relation to how they function to support the whole organism (Jackson, 2006). Systems thinking involves having a broad view of things and studying interactions, leading to a better understanding of the big picture (Palaima and Skaržauskiene, 2010); therefore, it is a framework for recognizing interrelationships and "a discipline for seeing wholes" (Rangone and Mella, 2019, p. 24).

According to Sipe and Frick (2009), in servant leadership, there are four requirements for seeing things whole: 1) moving in the right direction, which is central to the concept of wholeness (Greenleaf, 1998); 2) "see[ing] life in all its glorious messiness without all the loose ends tied up in neat, simplistic bows" (Sipe and Frick, 2009, p. 137); 3) "lov[ing] the sheer beauty of this world despite its complexity" (Sipe and Frick, 2009, p. 137); and 4) practicing ethical conduct, which requires servant leaders to accept responsibility, act in ethical ways, and aim to understand the outcomes of their actions (Sipe and Frick, 2009). In other words, a servant leader understands the big picture by connecting all its parts and following the core competencies of servant leadership: being comfortable with complexity, demonstrating adaptability, and considering the greater good (Sipe and Frick, 2009).

2.2 Servant leadership and shared accountability

A number of studies name accountability as one of the core tasks of servant leaders (e.g., Laub, 1999; Ragnarsson et al., 2018). For servant leaders, accountability means accepting responsibilities related to organizational goals and vision and being accountable towards co-workers, customers, and society (van Dierendonck, 2011). Accountability also relates to accepting high standards at work (Gunnarsdóttir, 2014), setting clear expectations, and holding people responsible for their work (Coetzer et al., 2017; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2015). Greenleaf's (2002) concept of power can be related to accountability, as, in servant leadership, everyone is expected to have an opportunity to influence others through persuasion and collaboration and to accept accountability to participate in decision-making in their workplace. Therefore, the typical organizational pyramid structure is inverted so that managers are not sitting alone at the top making decisions; instead, they serve and delegate power to employees, enabling them to participate in the decision-making (Greenleaf, 2008) as servant leaders seek to treat others with dignity while building a participative community (Whetstone, 2002).

2.3 Servant leadership and the growth of employees and the organization

The focus in servant leadership is on the interest of the followers (Kool and van Dierendonck, 2012) as servant leaders are motivated to serve others (Reed et al., 2011), and they put the interests of followers ahead of their own (McCallaghan et al., 2020; Hale and Fields, 2007). Servant leaders obtain satisfaction from helping others grow with the aim of helping

them to become servant leaders as well, while servant leaders also aim to grow themselves (Greenleaf, 2002). Greenleaf's best test underlines this focus on employee growth; the test uses the following questions to assess whether servant leadership is accomplished: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (2002, p. 27).

Many empirical studies highlight servant leadership's focus on employee growth (e.g., Barnabas and Sundararajan, 2012; Hale and Fields, 2007; Liden et al., 2014) and servant leaders' commitment to developing and helping people grow in the workplace (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Dennis and Bocarnea, 2005; Liden et al., 2008; Reed et al., 2011). Servant leaders prioritize helping people grow over focusing on organizational performance and profit (Gunnarsdóttir and Kristjánsdóttir, 2020; Liu, 2019; Schwarz et al., 2016; Zarei et al., 2022). However, a focus on employee growth is assumed to contribute to the success of the organization (Bellamy, 2021). In this line, servant leaders aim to further the prosperity of the organization by prioritizing the welfare and growth of employees (Greenleaf, 2002) in contrast to other leadership theories, such as transformational leadership, which prioritize organizational outcomes (van Dierendonck et al., 2014).

A few studies have focused on servant leadership in relation to organizational growth; however, recent studies have demonstrated a positive link between servant leadership and organizational performance (Giolito et al., 2020; Saleem et al., 2020). Furthermore, studies have shown that accountability in servant leadership corresponds to responsibility for ensuring organizational success (Gunnarsdóttir, 2014; Roberts and Scapens, 1985; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2015) and that servant leadership is positively linked with organizational performance through a service climate (Huang et al., 2016).

2.4 The practice of servant leadership in devoted organizations

A few studies on the practice of servant leadership in devoted servant leadership organizations in the business sector have shed light on the experiences of employees in these organizations of their practice of servant leadership (Carter and Baghurst, 2014; McNeff and Irving 2017; Ragnarsson et al., 2018). These studies used qualitative methodologies and showed that servant leadership is practiced by helping people work together and creating a family atmosphere at work which relates to employee engagement (Carter and Baghurst, 2014; Ragnarsson et al., 2018), by emphasizing the two servant leadership dimensions of serving and leading, and by holding people accountable for achieving business results and being willing to make difficult decisions (Ragnarsson et al., 2018). Furthermore, McNeff and Irving (2017) added survey data to their qualitative findings from employees and owners, revealing that the owners' servant leadership practices contributed to job satisfaction and that valuing people served as a foundation for servant leadership behaviors.

In addition to empirical studies on the practice of servant leadership, essays and case studies also offer insights into the practice of servant leadership, such as Blanchard and Broadwell's (2018) book, which includes short essays from servant leadership practitioners and writers. These essays highlight the holistic approach of servant leadership and show that the practice of servant leadership involves a focus on both serving, entailing the implementation of servant leadership, and leading, including providing purpose and strategic actions for the organization (Blanchard and Broadwell, 2018).

Given the limited research in this area, further knowledge is needed to better understand what it is like for employees to work for a dedicated servant leadership organization.

3 Methodology

This study was conducted in an organization that has openly and strategically practiced servant leadership for decades or since the beginning of the 1970s, when Greenleaf was affiliated with the organization during its implementation of the servant leadership phi-

losophy. The organization, Bewo, is often referred to in academic and non-academic writings as a company dedicated to the practice of servant leadership. Operating in the business-to-business market, this employee-owned construction and facilities services organization has almost 3,000 employees and offers a full range of services from engineering and construction to operations and maintenance. The organization's mission statement includes a commitment to providing outstanding career opportunities through continuous improvement. The organization has branches in several regions in the United States, and Fortune magazine has repeatedly recognized it as one of the "100 Best Companies to Work For." To make the list, Fortune magazine evaluates organizations based on criteria of credibility, respect, fairness, pride, and camaraderie; in other words, the employees of a listed organization must believe that they work for a great organization, trust the people for whom they work, have pride in their work, and enjoy working with their fellow employees (Great Place to Work, 2019). Bewo has been in the top 10 of the list many times, and, in 2017, it was on the "Great Place to Work Legends" list, which included 12 organizations that had been on the Fortune "100 Best Companies to Work For" list for 20 continuous years (Great Place to Work, 2019).

Bewo has a leadership development program for employees built on the principle of servant leadership, and one of the main objectives is helping employees understand and practice servant leadership. The program's four levels are tailored to different employee roles within the organization; each level has a special leadership focus, including a focus on individuals, teams, and the organization itself. Every employee (including new employees) must attend various classes, depending on their work role. The program includes several servant leadership classes that for instance, focus on trust, accountability, care, and growth.

Our study examines employees' lived experiences of working in this servant leadership organization. A phenomenological approach is appropriate for data collection and analysis in order to systematically explore the lived experience of people in particular situations, reveal the meaning of those situations, and richly describe what it is really like for the people who work in this type of organization (van Manen, 2016).

Sixteen interviews were conducted for this study, including six follow-up interviews. Half of the participants held management positions, and the other half held non-management positions. There was an equal number of women and men; their ages ranged from 27 to 78, and they had worked for the organization from about two years to 50 years. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured, included open-ended questions, and lasted from 50-70 minutes. To ensure confidentiality, all interviewees were given pseudonyms. Most of the interviews were conducted in meeting rooms at the organization's headquarters, but two of the interviews were conducted online.

Employees were asked about, for instance, their work life, how they experienced interacting with others at work, and how they communicated if they wanted to encourage others and to influence changes on the job. They were also asked about the meaning and importance of growth and personal development at work and how employees are encouraged to learn and develop. Moreover, employees were asked about how important decisions are made, how goals are set in their workplace, and how mistakes and challenges on the job are handled. All employees were asked about what servant leadership meant to them and about their experiences regarding how it is practiced in their workplace.

The employees seemed relaxed and expressed themselves willingly. After conducting each interview, thoughts and observations were written down, and recorded on a digital recorder with the aim of thoroughly documenting the experiences of each employee.

3.1 Data analysis: Description, reduction, and interpretation

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted according to the phenomenological methodology (van Manen, 2016) and three steps of analysis used:

description, reduction, and interpretation (Lanigan, 1988; Orbe, 1998). In the first step, description, the interviews take place and the transcripts from the interviews synthesized into a cohesive narrative. In this step, it was important to suspend presuppositions about how the employees would present the phenomenon and to be aware of biases and subjectivity by bracketing presuppositions that could prevent a neutral judgment of the lived experience of participants (Kristjánsdóttir and DeTurk, 2013; Lanigan, 1988). In relation to description, it is important that lived experience equates with living through prereflective experience which means we cannot access the meaning of our experience through introspective reflection because if we reflect on an experience we are having at that exact moment, the moment is already gone (van Manen, 2017). In the second step, reduction, the process of transcribing continues and the researcher starts becoming more aware of the phenomenon as consciously described by interviewees. In this step it was decided which part of the description was most important by examining all narratives to determine essential themes (Lanigan, 1988). In the third and final step, interpretation, meanings that were ambiguous or not exposed in the previous phases are thematized. The aim was to attempt to interpret the concealed meaning and to interpret the meanings of a phenomenon which are not immediately manifest in description (van Manen, 2016). This phase includes reducing the themes to identify the most important things and to relate the themes to one another and to the research question (Lanigan, 1988). Using these three steps of analysis enhanced the opportunity for a deeper understanding and exploration of lived experiences of the employees in the study and displaying the meaning of those situations.

4 Findings

The participating employees in this study experienced the practice of servant leadership as a holistic approach with focus on shared accountability continuous growth of employees and the organization, extensive training, and combination of their work and personal lives. Three themes that emerged from the study will be discussed below, describing the employees' experience of the organization's current practice of servant leadership: 1) "Not just the work life but your whole self", 2) "The sky is the limit": Continuous growth of employees and the organization and 3) "Diverse minds make better decisions."

4.1 "Not just the work life but your whole self"

The employees experienced that their efforts at work are not only about focusing on work-related issues but also on establishing close relationships and sharing personal information while showing support and care for each other. Rachel explained this as follows:

It's a friendly environment, it's not ... you come into work and just ... get your work done and then go home ... It's not just work, work, work ... I feel like we actually have a relationship ... Not just the work life but your whole self.

Employees experienced their workplace as a friendly and supportive community; they were proud to be part of this community, and many of them have worked for the organization for years. Linda explained this experience and described how well co-workers know each other and how the community at work enables people to work together as they monitor each other. This enables them to help each other at work:

We know each other's children, families. I use [Bewo] as my family. We all kind of know what's going on with each other's lives ... and it also helps because having that relationship lets us know if somebody is having a little bit of an off day or acting a little out of character, maybe upset, then you know how to work with that person better.

Rachel and Linda's experiences indicate that a family spirit and closeness on a personal level fuel the work environment; employees want their fellow workers to do well on the job. Employees even used the term family to describe their experiences in their work environment. As Tammy said, "It's more like a family feeling than it is a co-worker feeling." William emphasized the same when describing how employees' work roles and personal roles merge together:

People talk about work life balance; I talk about work life integration
It's just all sort of one big thing. It's not, I'm gonna go to work, and then I'm gonna be a dad and a husband, and [then] I'm gonna go and get involved in the community.

Alexander also underlined that employees support each other at work and on a personal basis: "Life is a journey There's ups and downs in a person's life, they [co-workers] have whole lives You just gotta be in it for the long haul with people." Despite the aforementioned family spirit, employees were willing to accept responsibility when fellow workers were not contributing as expected on the job. In some instances, people lost their jobs. Dora described this:

It's never easy to say goodbye to somebody, but we always feel good about doing the right thing ... maybe there is just not a fit here, they [the co-workers] weren't performing ... so those are the more challenging days But it's always for the bigger picture of we have a business to run, we have a group that needs ... to move on.

Dora's words indicate that, while it is challenging for employees to lay fellow workers off, they handle it in line with the organization's vision and goals. It is difficult for employees to "say goodbye" and see co-workers leave the workplace after developing personal relationships with them. By supporting this kind of exit, they believe that they are doing the right thing for their fellow employees and for the prosperity of the organization, which the employees own. As witnessed in Linda's words, "It's very difficult to let somebody go because you developed a relationship with them, you know their family, you know their situations. But sometimes it's the right thing to do."

Dora summarized the overall experience of employees in this theme by underlining that the holistic approach of their practice of servant leadership at work is based on having an interest in their co-workers' whole lives, including their work and personal lives: "We are comfortable in being our whole selves [at work] ... and also, touching on servant leadership, it's not about ... you are somebody at home, [and you are] somebody [else] at work You are the same person."

4.2 "The sky is the limit": Continuous growth of employees and the organization

Employees expressed that an extensive focus on employee training was an integral part of their experience of the practice of servant leadership enabling them to reach their potential as workers and persons. Morris said: "[Bewo] is tremendous with training They pay for everything ... the only thing holding you back is you." According to Morris, employees can achieve anything they desire through their training opportunities, giving them the confidence and support they need to succeed in their jobs.

Employees are expected to attend classes, and the servant leadership classes are the focal point of the training program, as Kim explained: "[Bewo] promotes training. Since day one, you ... sign up for these classes, and servant leadership is obviously one of the biggest ones They want you to go to all the servant leadership classes." Kim also talked

about how employees seem comfortable with this approach and believe that training can help them achieve ambitious goals, both personal and professional. Therefore, they are devoted because they look at it as necessary for their job: "The sky is the limit when it comes to training at [Bewo], and [for] me personally, I'm on-the-job training because the way I learn, I see it and accept it."

As Morris observed, employees see the training opportunities as foundational for their continuous growth and the continuous growth of the organization: "Servant leadership to me is all about serving others, and when I say that, it's about growing people We expect, if you are a leader, to grow people, be a better person and helping [to] grow others." Tammy also noted that people depend on one another to help them to grow and added that their assigned mentors encourage this: "One of the key things for my personal growth is the people around me They push me to grow and encourage me and mentor me."

Employees are motivated at work to grow and take responsibility for their own development and their career trajectory within the company, and they define and review their personal goals in quarterly review meetings. Linda said, "I'm not gonna just rely on somebody else for my growth It's a partnership We're in it together I'm just developing a [career] plan." According to Linda, employees help each other, demonstrating a willingness to grow and learn more skills on the job so that they can perhaps change jobs within the company or move up the corporate ladder.

The employees also revealed that they feel responsible for growing the business; they believe this is important for the prosperity of the organization and their work lives and includes achieving personal work goals and organizational goals. Morris spoke about the significance of this dual role and balanced growth within the organization: "At [Bewo], there are two things ... as a [servant] leader. You have to grow people and you have to make money. That's the expectation, so you gotta make that happen." Employees experienced this twofold role that servant leaders play as a key part of growing people while fulfilling the vision of the organization, and they felt that this approach is essential as it benefits the employees and the organization. Nelson framed this approach of constant and dual growth as follows: "The biggest challenge we face by far is growing leaders fast enough to meet the growth needs of the business."

4.3 "Diverse minds make better decisions"

Employees emphasized that they are highly motivated at work and that they experience equality between managers and non-managers. When making decisions, employees share accountability and collaborate on finding the best solutions since the consideration of different perspectives helps them make better decisions. Dora explained how different people bring different things to the table:

It's always great to get different minds in the room because diverse minds make better decisions together. It's not all the same perspective, and you kind of assume you know it all, you try to put smarter people in the room around you [... This] allows us to truly achieve more together as collaborative diverse teams.

Dora's words show that employees believe that an inclusive approach helps improve their decision-making because they accept and utilize different viewpoints. The employees seem to collectively embrace high expectations, which relates to their desire and motivation to constantly aim to make better decisions and achieve goals. Rachel spoke about this: "We play hard because we work hard, so ... we work a lot and there is always this sense of accomplishment every time you send something out or ... you finish your projects." Employees revealed that, even when they are busy, they want to work hard because they are passionate about their work and take their jobs seriously. As Dora explained:

It's almost like you are being pushed, which isn't a bad thing but ... [It] took me less than a year to realize that [what] every Bewo partner [co-worker] has in common [is] that we are kinda like overloaded, but we all really love our jobs, and we all, we wanna do more, and you say, "yes please, yes please some more, yes please, more."

As Dora and Rachel indicated, employees are able to participate in decision-making; expectations are high, but employee growth at work is supported as underlined by Nelson: "You have to get results, and you have to help people to grow if you want to lead." These experiences indicate a sincere interest in meeting the needs of others while helping them focus on accountability and ambition. Employees take their work seriously as they seek to maximize their efforts to solve problems by working together. Nelson explained this as follows:

When we have diverse teams, we make better decisions. I hope that we always try to look at that first and not just get, you know, three or four or five people that all think alike in the room to make a decision or to work on a problem.

Employees described how they collaborate and depend on each other in a significant way. In their experience, managers do not seem to see themselves as bosses nor do their subordinates. Alexander underscored this: "I don't really regard those that I supervise as subordinates to me ... I regard them as co-workers and I feel like ... either I need to have a lot to offer them or I'm not needed." Rachel also experiences managers as caring for people and willing to help out at work.

My supervisor, [who likes to be called a] tour guide, cares about me ... We are on a deadline ... he helps [me], then I feel not only good for going above and beyond but I feel good because he's gonna go above and beyond.

This shows that Rachel considers managers to be role models, and she is willing to do the same for others.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to acquire a deep understanding of employee experiences to better understand the practice of servant leadership within an organization dedicated to servant leadership. Consequently, we aimed to answer the following research question:

What is it like for employees to work in a dedicated employee-owned servant leadership organization in the construction industry and facilities services business?

The findings indicate that the foundation of the practice of servant leadership at Bewo rests on a holistic approach and the shared accountability of employees who are highly motivated to serve the interests of their fellow workers and the organization. Extensive training opportunities and dedication to the continuous growth of the business and people further support the prosperity of the employees and the organization.

The first theme "*not just the work life but your whole self*" revealed that employees experienced that their relationships with co-workers provide them with a friendly and family-oriented environment. Employees want their co-workers to be part of their whole lives not just their work lives, and they seek to know each other on a personal level as it seems to give them fulfillment to bond with their co-workers by sharing their personal lives with them. This can be linked to the holistic approach of the concept of servant leadership (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016; Eva et al., 2019) as servant leaders aim to and attend to the

needs of their people and their organization in a holistic way (Greenleaf, 1998; Sipe and Frick, 2009).

This is demonstrated in how employees share personal information and rejoice and support each other on work and personal issues. This can be linked to the dimension of emotional healing in Liden et al.'s (2015) model underlining that servant leaders pursue to help others to solve personal problems and show care for their overall well-being; as evidenced in the core element of sincere interest in other people being an important element of the serving part of servant leadership (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2018).

Employees revealed that they seek to create a special bond and trust between themselves and perceive a family culture in their workplace. These ideas can be linked to Carter and Baghurst's (2014) findings about how servant leaders aim to develop positive working relationships; this is also in accordance with Zhang et al., (2012), who related servant leadership to family-oriented environments. Toor and Ofori (2009) also supported these ideas, presenting that servant leaders aim to create value in their communities, being one of the foundations of servant leadership, which contributes to serving behavior in the workplace (McNeff and Irving, 2017). This experience of employees can be linked to Tang et al.'s (2016) findings that servant leadership includes a focus on work life and family life as servant leaders show care for followers' personal issues (Gandolfi and Stone, 2018) and positively impact the lives of employees (Qureshi et al., 2019). The employees' desires for bonds, trust, and a family culture corresponds to the idea that servant leadership can be considered a way of life (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016) as servant leadership goes beyond the actual work environment and affects people's overall life satisfaction (Hakanen and van Dierendonck, 2011).

Furthermore, the theme "*not just the work life but your whole self*" corresponds to Greenleaf's (2002) best test, which applies to people's whole lives because they are supposed to grow holistically as individuals. In addition, this coincides with the aforementioned works that influenced Greenleaf's creation of servant leadership, namely, E. B. White's writings about seeing things whole (Greenleaf, 1998), and the story, *The Journey to the East* (Greenleaf, 2008), where the main character, Leo, demonstrates that servant leadership is integrated into every aspect of a person's life by caring for all of the needs of his group members. This holistic approach relates to both the serving and the leading part of servant leadership as Leo showed sincere interest in other people, which is placed in the serving part of servant leadership, while also providing foresight and clear vision, which is placed in the leading part of servant leadership (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2018).

In addition, the holistic approach of servant leadership is in line with systems thinking (Ackoff, 1999) and the importance of studying every single part of a whole (Jackson, 2006), which leads to a broad view of things (Palaima and Skaržauskiene, 2010; Rangone and Mella, 2019). Barrett and Blanchard supported the importance of looking at the big picture facing organizations (Blanchard and Broadwell, 2018); since servant leadership involves the wholeness of individuals, organizations, and society (McClellan, 2008), servant leaders must connect the dots to establish an overall picture, deal with complexity, and consider the greater good (Sipe and Frick, 2009).

Although employees revealed that they experienced the community at work as personal and close, they did not show a reluctance to cut ties with fellow employees if they felt it was the right thing to do, such as if employees broke certain rules or were not performing well enough. They considered it their shared accountability because of their ambition and desire to achieve their goals and the demand, according to the organization's vision, to grow employees and the business in which they have ownership. This is in line with studies underlining that servant leaders aim to serve all stakeholders (Gunnarsdóttir, 2014; van Dierendonck, 2011) and the empowering dimension of servant leadership, which, among other things, stands for trusting people to accept responsibility at work (van Dierendonck, 2011). Accordingly, Ragnarsson et al., (2018) found that practicing servant leadership

might require utilizing the leading part even more than the serving part, including laying off employees, which is also consistent with the core element of foresight and clear vision and involves accountability, including making difficult decisions, placed in the leading part of servant leadership (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2018).

Overall, we found the application of a holistic approach to be an important part of the practice of servant leadership. However, to the best of our knowledge, previous studies on dedicated servant leadership organizations have not identified this aspect of servant leadership.

In the second theme, *“the sky is the limit”*: *Continuous growth of employees and the organization*, employees experienced that training enables them to grow, which means learning and evolving, accepting accountability, and taking on new challenges and roles at work, which highlights Greenleaf’s best test of servant leadership that underlines the focus on person’s growth (2002); as one of the main roles of servant leaders in the workplace is their devotion to developing and growing people (e.g., Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Dennis and Bocarnea, 2005; Reed et al., 2011).

Employees expressed ambition for themselves and for their organization and believed that their workplace success depends on strategically growing themselves and their organization by participating in Bewo’s extensive training opportunities. The courage and self-confidence of employees to develop is supported by the focus on employees in the practice of servant leadership which is supported by Liden et al.’s model (2015) on servant leadership, in particular putting subordinates first corresponding to servant leader’s focus on meeting employees’ need for growth and success (Hale and Fields, 2007; Liden et al., 2014; Zarei et al., 2022; Xiu et al., 2023). Two core elements of servant leadership under the serving part are also relevant: sincere interest in other people, which includes being able to help people grow, and self-knowledge, which includes developing and knowing one’s strengths and weaknesses (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2018). Additionally, helping co-workers grow and reach their full potential corresponds to the dimension of helping subordinates grow and succeed in Liden et al.’s model (2015).

For the organization, growing means aiming for more revenue while delivering financial profits. We can link the desire to further the prosperity of an organization to the concept of accountability as several studies present that servant leaders focus on responsibility to attain organizational goals (Greenleaf, 2002; Gunnarsdóttir, 2014; Ragnarsson et al., 2018; Roberts and Scapens, 1985; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2015).

Furthermore, studies have found positive relationships between servant leadership and organizational performance in a service climate (Huang et al., 2016) and between servant leadership and business unit performance in terms of profit growth (Giolito et al., 2020). However, previous studies about servant leadership do not underline an equivalent focus on the growth of the organization and the employees as the main focus in organizations is supposed to be on employee growth (e.g., Greenleaf, 2002; Hale and Fields, 2007; Liden et al., 2014; McCallaghan et al., 2020; Zarei et al., 2022). To our knowledge, previous studies have not presented the practice of servant leadership in terms of a balanced approach to the growth of the employees and the organization.

The findings related to the third theme, *“diverse minds make better decisions,”* indicate that employees share accountability, acknowledging that their different viewpoints enable them to make better decisions. This is in line with that servant leaders emphasize collaboration (Irving and Longbotham, 2007) and value people’s different points of view and diverse mindsets (Mittal and Dorfman, 2012). Employees believe that everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute and be part of the group, and they enjoy working together. This is supported by Greenleaf that people are supposed to have opportunities to enjoy their work and the importance of influencing and collaborating with others (2002) as treating others well, respecting others, and building a participative community is considered important (Whetstone, 2002). Sharing accountability and making significant decisions are

aspects of foresight and clear vision, one of the core elements of servant leadership (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2018), referring to accepting responsibilities and having a shared vision as servant leaders embrace accountability and to make decisions together, situated in the leading part of servant leadership (e.g., Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2018; Ragnarsson et al., 2018; van Dierendonck, 2011). To our best knowledge, previous studies of committed servant leadership organizations have not presented this finding that employees share their accountability in their practice of servant leadership.

Employees experience that they have the authority to make important decisions and they disclose that there seem to be no barriers between managers and non-managers. Because of this, employees believe that rank does not matter as they experience that everyone has the chance to have an influence at work. This is supported by Greenleaf's emphasis on inverting the organizational pyramid so managers can delegate power, including participation in decision-making in the workplace (2008) as the pyramid needs to be placed upside down to enable the practice of servant leadership (Blanchard and Broadwell, 2018). Many studies on servant leadership have documented this method of delegating power and encouraging employees to participate in decision-making (e.g., Parris and Peachey, 2013; van Dierendonck, 2011). Furthermore, according to Liden et al. (2015), one of the dimensions of servant leadership is empowering, which includes autonomy.

Employees also revealed that they are ambitious and passionate about their jobs which can be related to many studies that have found that servant leadership positively affects employee motivation and well-being at work (Eva et al., 2019; Langhof and Guldenberg, 2020; Kaltiainen and Hakanen, 2022). This coincides with Southwest Airlines and Synovus Financial's primary goal of pursuing employee satisfaction by putting their employees' interests before the interests of other stakeholders (Blanchard and Broadwell, 2018).

5.1 Theoretical implications

The findings of this study shed light on three principal aspects of the practice of servant leadership. First, employees revealed their dedication to seeing the big picture as one of the principles of servant leadership. This means they aim to have a holistic view of things, such as leadership, accountability, growing personally and professionally, and making difficult decisions. Furthermore, they take the whole picture into consideration regarding issues, such as responsibilities, success, needs, and finances. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first empirical study to present findings on a holistic approach to servant leadership. This type of approach is in line with servant leadership being a concept about contributing to the wholeness of individuals, organizations, and society (McClellan, 2008) and the concept of systems thinking (Ackeroff, 1999; Jackson, 2006; Rangone and Mella, 2019). Thus, our study supports previous theoretical conclusions that the philosophy of servant leadership is holistic in nature (Eva et al., 2019) as servant leaders aim to provide the whole picture (Sipe and Frick, 2009) and attend to needs in a holistic way (Greenleaf, 2008). This is evident in Greenleaf's (1998; 2008) best test and his emphasis on the importance of seeing things as a whole as servant leadership concerns the whole life of individuals.

Second, the findings indicate that dedication to the continuous and balanced growth of the organization and its employees is the foundation of the practice of servant leadership. To the best of our knowledge, previous studies have not presented this balanced approach to serving and leading. However, previous studies have emphasized servant leadership's focus on people through its focus on employee growth (e.g., Greenleaf, 2002; Hale and Fields, 2007; Liden et al., 2014; van Dierendonck et al., 2014; Zarei et al., 2022) although the literature also suggests organizational benefit from servant leadership (Bellamy, 2021; Gunnarsdóttir, 2014; Roberts and Scapens, 1985; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2015; Xiu et al., 2023) and more recently focused on organizational performance through service climate (Huang et al., 2016) and profit growth (Giolito et al., 2020).

Third, as far as we know, this is the first empirical study revealing a shared accountabil-

ity among employees in their overall practice of servant leadership, including depending on each other and working together to make better decisions. However, the current study echoes findings from numerous studies about how accountability is part of the core of servant leadership (e.g., Gunnarsdóttir, 2014; Ragnarsson et al., 2018; van Dierendonck, 2011).

To sum up, this research sheds light on how employees experience the practice of servant leadership, demonstrating the principles of a holistic approach and emphasizing the equivalent growth of the employees and the organization and the acceptance of shared accountability, which leads to both satisfied employees and positive organizational performance.

5.2 Practical implications

Among the practical implications of the present study is that implementing a holistic approach, including encouraging friendships and enabling increased closeness among employees in the workplace, may lead to more effective collaboration and more satisfied employees who are dedicated to their work and are willing to share their accountability. Based on the study findings, employees should be inspired to work together and consult each other; they should be guided by their objectives, defined in their career plan, and focus on their own well-being and success at work while taking into consideration the vision of the organization.

Furthermore, the study suggests that intertwining the growth of employees and the growth of the organization may be beneficial for everyone; this can be accomplished by motivating employees to accept responsibility for this dual growth, such as by showing them that it may help them achieve successful work lives. In relation to this, it is imperative to provide employees with the support and training necessary to grow themselves as well as the organization. To do this in a strategic way, the present study shows that each employee should have a career plan that employees and their managers examine and review in regular meetings where personal goals are also defined and discussed. The study also shows that communication should include frequent, short, and informal conversations. Additionally, each employee should be held responsible for their own career plan. However, employees should be helped to realize what it means to go on a specific path within the company, as defined in their career plan, which should be monitored, such as in terms of the knowledge, skills, and work experience the employees will need to travel their chosen path. In relation to this, employees should have the chance to take on new challenges and roles at work.

One other practical implication of the study is that rank should not matter because employees perceive each other as equals. This seems to work out well as employees are trusted to be accountable, revealing another important practical implication of the study—employees should be allowed and encouraged to express themselves openly and honestly at work while being trusted to take on responsibilities. This would also help employees make difficult decisions together.

The current study has limitations. Since the studied organization operates in the business sector and is employee-owned, an exploration of other types of servant leadership organizations, such as those that are not employee-owned and servicing the business-to-consumer market or a mix of the two may reveal other employee experiences of the practice of servant leadership, and therefore present different findings. Moreover, this is a qualitative study, however, a quantitative study or a blending of the two might lead to different findings.

The findings reveal that employees experience an equivalent focus on the growth of the business and employees. This suggests the need for more research about how employees in servant leadership organizations blend serving and leading, as former studies of

servant leadership do not reveal this balanced approach to serving and leading. Additionally, investigating employees' experience of working for servant leadership organizations in the consumer business, or those which service both the business-to-business market and the business-to-consumer market, may be of value as this research includes an organization servicing the business-to-business market. For these reasons, we would like to see continued research in this area.

This study adds to the understanding and knowledge of the practice of servant leadership through the experiences of employees who work in an organization committed to servant leadership. These employees exercise servant leadership in a holistic way, which leads to both employee satisfaction and positive organizational performance. The findings reveal that their servant leadership practices rely on accepting shared accountability and looking at the big picture, built on significant training efforts as employees aim for a constant and balanced growth for the business and themselves leading to a mutual prosperity. Employees are encouraged and helped to grow as they desire and as a result they are satisfied and believe that they can accomplish almost everything they wish for, still this has to go hand in hand with organizational growth.

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