EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES IN A SERVANT-LED ORGANISATION: TREAT OTHERS AS YOU WISH TO BE TREATED

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Abstract. Numerous organisations attribute their accomplishments to the practice of servant leadership. However, only a few studies have focused on understanding the experience of employees working in an organisation committed to servant leadership. Furthermore, none of these studies have explored employees' experience with their daily guiding principles. The objective of this study is to gain insight into the nature of work in an organisation devoted to servant leadership, thereby guided by this philosophy. This is a qualitative study that employs a phenomenological approach. The study was conducted within a U.S.-based architecture and engineering services firm operating in the business-to-business market, which has maintained a longstanding dedication to servant leadership. The data collection process involves the conduction of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with both managerial and non-managerial staff members, with the option of follow-up interviews. Two main themes emerged: "Treat others how you wish to be treated" and *doing the right thing*. The findings contribute to both the theoretical foundation and practical application of servant leadership. The findings indicate that the practice of servant leadership, grounded in Christian values, served as the foundation for the organisation's guiding principles. These principles are rooted in the ethical framework of the Golden Rule, emphasising the value of acting in accordance with moral principles. The overarching philosophy that guides the organisation is predicated on the notion that it imbues employees with a sense of purpose in their professional endeavours, thereby endowing them with the requisite confidence and fortitude to adopt a servant leadership stance. The study also carries practical value, as the findings highlight collaboration within the organisation, centred on mutual support, moral values, openness, and accountability.

Keywords: Christianity, co-operation, ethical behaviour, guiding principles, practice, servant leadership.

JEL Classification: M10, M12

1. Introduction

In the context of practising servant leadership in organisations, the focus is on employee well-being and personal growth (Barnabas & Sundararajan, 2012; Eva et al., 2019; Flynn et al., 2016; Giolito et al., 2020). The concept of servant leadership, which emphasises providing leadership through serving, was first introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf (1970). The act of serving others is central to servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019; Kool & van Dierendonck, 2012; Liu, 2019; Parris & Peachey, 2013), and the overarching goal is to foster a fair workplace in which employees can flourish (Greenleaf, 1970). Although serving others

lies at the core of servant leadership (McCallaghan et al., 2020; Sendjaya et al., 2008), the philosophy also encompasses leading through service (Greenleaf, 2008).

There has been a growing interest among researchers and practitioners in understanding the nature of servant leadership (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Ragnarsson et al., 2023), particularly since many organisations attribute their success to the practice of servant leadership (Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2025; Eva et al., 2019; Ragnarsson et al., 2018; Usun, 2010). Furthermore, increasing evidence highlights the value of servant leadership in addressing workplace challenges by promoting employee well-being

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(Eva et al., 2019; Kaltiainen & Hakanen, 2022; Xiu et al., 2024). Furthermore, despite the increased research on this topic, there is still a need for a better understanding of how servant leadership is practised within servant-led organisations (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2024; Hunter et al., 2013; Liao et al., 2021; Parris & Peachey, 2013; Ragnarsson et al., 2023). A substantial body of research has been dedicated to the examination of the antecedents, outcomes and effectiveness of servant leadership (Eva et al., 2029; Zhang et al., 2021). The extant literature on the subject is, to the best of the present authors' knowledge, extremely limited, with the majority of studies on the subject concentrating on the application of the concept in organisations not dedicated to its practice (Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2025; Ragnarsson et al., 2023). A paucity of studies has hitherto explored employees' experience of servant leadership in organisations dedicated to the philosophy. Furthermore, no previous research has examined how employees experience their guiding principles of servant leadership in daily practice, as this study does. The objective of this study is to obtain an insight into the experience of employees working in an organisation committed to servant leadership, and to explore the guiding principles that they experience in their workplace.

This qualitative research, employing a phenomenological approach, was conducted in an organisation based in the U.S. that has formally practised servant leadership for nearly fifty years. The founder of the organisation introduced and implemented servant leadership right from the outset, and the organisation, referred to here as Penz (a pseudonym), has primarily served non-profit organisations. The present study employs the Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA) model (Laub, 1999), a foundational model of servant leadership, as a theoretical framework, in conjunction with extant research on servant leadership, particularly studies that examine its practice.

The study has its limitations. It focuses on a single organisation that primarily serves non-profit clients and is led by servant leadership principles. Organisations led by servants that serve different customer groups or operate in other contexts may demonstrate different practices and employee experiences. For instance, organisations serving consumer markets or a combination of business and consumer clients could produce different results.

The subsequent section undertakes a review of the extant literature on the subject of servant leadership. This includes leadership guiding principles, ethical behaviour, the intersection of servant leadership and Christianity, and the practice of servant leadership. The article then goes on to explain the phenomenological methodology, present the results,

discuss the two themes in light of theory and research, and conclude with a summary of the findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Servant Leadership

Greenleaf's inaugural paper on servant leadership, entitled *The Servant as Leader*, was published in 1970. However, the concept has existed for much longer, having been traced back to the world's major religions and philosophies (Barbuto et al., 2014). In order to emphasise this point, Greenleaf employs the use of examples from both fictional and non-fictional characters, some of whom existed prior to his own era, including Jesus Christ, whom he regarded as a servant leader (Greenleaf, 2008). In the context of organisational settings, the concept of servant leadership emphasises the cultivation of employees' growth within their respective workplaces, whilst simultaneously addressing their needs. This approach entails the provision of direction, purpose, and accountability (Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2017). Irving and Longbotham (2007) posited that the primary objective of servant leaders is to facilitate effective collaboration, prioritising the provision of service before the pursuit of leadership roles (Prosser, 2010). According to Greenleaf (2002), serving and leading are intertwined, where *to serve* comes first and *to lead* follows: "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 6).

The capacity to listen is regarded as a fundamental characteristic and indispensable skill of servant leaders, as it enables them to comprehend and address the crucial needs of their followers (Laub, 1999; van Dierendonck, 2011). Addressing these needs is also important and relevant from the point of view of organisational goals and visions (Greenleaf, 2002). This is closely related to an alternative orientation and a genuine desire to serve, listen, be authentic, and assist others in their growth. These elements are pivotal to servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970). Authenticity is defined as integrity, the act of being genuine, and being truthful (Lee et al., 2020; van Dierendonck, 2011). This also entails the ability to empathise, which is defined as the capacity to place oneself in another's position (Blanchard, 2015). Empathic behaviour has been associated with the widely recognised principle of the Golden Rule, which states, "treat others as you would like to be treated" (Goodman, 2014, p. 381). This principle has been identified in a variety of philosophical systems and religions, including Christianity, and has been associated with business ethics as a moral principle (Burton & Goldsby, 2005). Another orientation is closely related to the concept of altruism and an altruistic mindset. According to

Snyder and Lopez (2007), altruism may be defined as a demeanour or conduct with the objective of benefiting others. Greenleaf (1970) describes this concept as the provision of services to people's needs. The notion of altruism, along with an altruistic mindset, is a foundational element of servant leadership, distinguishing it from other leadership approaches (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Lu et al., 2024; Beck, 2014).

The notion of compassionate love is regarded as a pivotal component in the relationship between servant leaders and their followers (Patterson & van Dierendonck, 2015). Furthermore, according to van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015), compassionate love is an antecedent for servant leadership that fosters a virtuous attitude and influences behaviours such as stewardship, providing direction, empowerment, and authenticity. Furthermore, Sun (2013) concludes that the self-identity of servant leaders, which drives their desire to serve first, includes attributes such as humility, empathy, a calling to serve, and love. Compassionate love is associated with agapao love, a Greek term for moral love (Winston, 2003), which emphasises acting in accordance with moral principles (Singh et al., 2017). In this regard, moral love is characterised by its unselfish nature (Patterson, 2003) and can be regarded as the fundamental motivation for providing service (Freeman, 2011). Southwest Airlines (2025) is an exemplary organisation that embodies this concept, as evidenced by its core value, which underscores the significance of employees possessing a servant's heart. The company emphasises the imperative of leading with love, which entails a profound dedication to serving others. Southwest Airlines fosters an environment that encourages employees to demonstrate respect and prioritise the needs of others, while exhibiting proactively compassionate customer service (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018). Southwest Airlines emphasises its commitment to employees by incorporating the heart logo and spelling the letter LUV (an acronym for love) in their corporate branding (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018). This approach is further exemplified by their listing on the New York Stock Exchange market.

A plethora of models pertaining to servant leadership have been published, with one such model being the inaugural empirical study of servant leadership, which was conducted by Laub (1999). This study incorporates the Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA), a quantitative measure of the perceived practice of servant leadership within organisations. The OLA model is comprised of six clusters of servant leadership characteristics, also referred to as foundational disciplines, which are intended to "guide our understanding and practice of servant leadership" (Laub, 2018, p. 107). The six characteristics or disciplines are: *value people, develop people, build community, display authenticity, provide leadership*, and *share leadership*. *Valuing people* involves demonstrating care and compassion, placing trust in others, believing in them, prioritising their needs, and engaging in listening that is open, receptive, and free of judgment. *Developing people* encompasses contributing to the broader community, fostering opportunities for growth and learning, modeling appropriate behaviour, and building others through encouragement and affirmation. *Building community* entails forming strong relationships, working collaboratively, and appreciating individual uniqueness. *Displaying authenticity* is reflected in being transparent and accountable, showing a willingness to learn from others, and consistently acting with integrity and trustworthiness. *Providing leadership* includes casting a vision for the future, taking initiative, setting clear goals, and acting with courage. Lastly, *sharing leadership* involves promoting a shared vision, practicing humility, recognising one's limitations, and depending on the contributions of others (Laub, 2018).

2.2 Leadership Guiding Principles

Stephen Covey, Ken Blanchard, and Renee Broadwell have written about guiding principles in relation to the concept of leadership (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018; Covey, 1999). Covey (1999) presented his *Principle-Centred Leadership* as being important in delivering a so-called *True North Compass* that would help organizations to seek, achieve, and maintain excellence. *Principle-Centred Leadership* is a leadership approach at four levels: organisational, managerial, interpersonal, and personal, including four key principles at each level: alignment, empowerment, trust and trustworthiness, where transparency is a key factor (Covey, 1999). Blanchard and Broadwell (2018) stated that organisational values operate as guiding principles for servant leadership, as they wrote: "Values provide guidelines for how you should proceed as you pursue your purpose and picture of the future ... They need to be clearly described so that you know exactly what behaviours demonstrate those values being lived" (p. 2).

2.3 Ethical Behaviour

The field of ethics examines notions of right and wrong and the ethical choices individuals make in society, with a focus on defining good and bad behaviour (Northouse, 2025). Ethical leaders consider the moral implications of their decisions (Brown & Treviño, 2006) and strive to act with integrity (Howell & Costley, 2006). Evaluating the ethics of a decision involves assessing its purpose, alignment with moral standards, and potential outcomes (Yukl, 2012).

As previously noted, servant leadership is predicated on the development and growth of people (Greenleaf,

2002; Hale & Fields, 2007; van Dierendonck et al., 2014; Zarei et al., 2022). Nonetheless, servant leadership also entails the aim of having a positive effect on all stakeholders, including contributing to society at large (e.g., Eva et al., 2019; Laub 1999; Lemoine et al., 2021; Parris & Peachey, 2013; van Dierendonck, 2011). Consequently, servant leaders can be regarded as ethical leaders, as servant leadership emphasises personal growth and adherence to ethical principles (Parris & Peachey, 2013). The approach is associated with ethical implications, as servant leaders promote moral behaviour and seek to protect others from leaders who are motivated by self-interest (McCallaghan et al., 2020; Toor & Ofori, 2009).

Numerous studies have revealed that servant leaders are ethical leaders. This means they strive to act righteously and maintain good work ethics (e.g., Hoch et al., 2018; Lemoine et al., 2025; Liden et al., 2015; Parris & Peachey, 2013), and do not behave in a self-serving manner (Winston & Ryan, 2008). According to Toor and Ofori (2009), servant leaders are considered trustworthy, honest, reliable and credible. Hakanen and van Dierendonck (2011), meanwhile, stated that servant leadership is strongly related to a sense of justice. Good work ethics are related to Greenleaf's concept of foresight, as he believed that failing to foresee the consequences of one's actions and decisions, and taking appropriate action if necessary, was an ethical failure (Greenleaf, 2008).

2.4 Servant Leadership and Christianity

Greenleaf (2008) and other scholars (Joo et al., 2018; McQuiston, 2018; Parris & Peachey, 2013; Udani & Lorenzo-Molo, 2013) have linked servant leadership to Christianity. Furthermore, Irving (2011) claimed that this model of leadership is consistent with biblical principles. In a similar vein, Nordbye and Irving (2017) wrote that 'servant leadership is an effective contemporary leadership practice, based on a growing body of empirical studies. It is also historically and biblically grounded' (p. 56). Furthermore, Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) argued that Jesus Christ exemplified servant leadership, teaching that it is defined by wholehearted dedication to serving others. Other studies also support the idea that Jesus was a servant leader (Benson & Peprah, 2021; Lanctot & Irving, 2010; Sun, 2013).

2.5 The Practice of Servant Leadership

The paucity of studies focusing on the practice of servant leadership in servant-led organisations will be reviewed below. There is a paucity of studies focusing on the practice of servant leadership within servant leadership organisations, including in the business

sector (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2025; McNeff & Irving, 2017; Ragnarsson et al., 2023). In their qualitative study, Carter and Baghurst (2014, p. 460) found that servant leadership helps people to work together because of their peer-to-peer relationships, as "employees felt their opinions were valued and owned their behaviour" and they feel responsible for serving the customers while contributing to organisational success. Carter and Baghurst's (2014) study examined the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement, while McNeff and Irving's (2017) study investigated the association between servant leadership and job satisfaction. The findings of Carter and Baghurst (2014) and McNeff and Irving (2017) indicated that employees foster a familial atmosphere within their professional milieu, a phenomenon characterised by mutual assistance and a dualistic focus on both serving and leading. An analogous conclusion was reached in a phenomenological study on the lived experience of employees in a servant leadership organisation by Ragnarsson et al. (2018), which demonstrated that individuals are inclined to be transparent with one another and assist each other in their professional development. Other main findings of the study were that people experienced servant leadership as including two dimensions, *serving* and *leading,* and that servant leadership is not a soft approach of management, as the dimension of *leading* was even more practiced than the dimensions of *serving,* and people are held accountable for achieving business results (Ragnarsson et al., 2018). Furthermore, a qualitative study by Ragnarsson et al. (2023) indicates that the foundation of the practice of servant leadership is a dedication to continuous and balanced growth of the organisation and its employees. A qualitative study by Gunnarsdóttir et al. (2024) focuses on the practice in a servant-led company, highlighting that servant leadership can be effectively practised in times of crisis, with a focus on both business outcomes and employee well-being. Meanwhile, the qualitative findings of Kristjánsdóttir et al. (2025) demonstrate that employees thoughtfully select customers in alignment with servant leadership, remaining equally committed to meeting the needs of both staff and clients.

The extant literature, albeit limited in scope, suggests a paucity of research concerning the practical implementation of servant leadership within business sector servant leadership organisations, as well as the principles that underpin this approach. The present study aims to enhance comprehension of the experiences of employees within an organisation that is committed to servant leadership and guided by such principles. To this end, the study seeks to address the following research question:

What is the experience of employees who work in an organisation dedicated to servant leadership, and how do they apply its guiding principles in their daily work?

The phenomenological methodology utilised in the study will be discussed next.

3. Method

The participating organisation, Penz, was selected for this study due to its long-standing, formal commitment to the practice of servant leadership, which it has upheld for nearly fifty years. The company is a US-based services firm with a specialism in architecture and engineering, with a workforce of over 150 employees. It operates within the business-to-business sector. The organisation is recognised by *Modern Servant Leader* as a servant leadership organisation. In order to be included, an organisation is required to demonstrate its perspective on, endorsement of, or commitment to practising servant leadership through at least one publicly available source. This evidence can be sourced from a variety of materials, including job descriptions, media coverage, employee testimonials, and other accessible documents (Modern Servant Leader, 2025). The organisation was founded by Penz, its inaugural CEO, who established the principles of servant leadership that would guide the institution. Over the years, the organisation has primarily provided services to non-profit organisations, including schools and churches. As stated on the organisation's website, they explicitly adhere to the principles of servant leadership, with their projects spanning nearly 30 states within the United States and several other countries.

Phenomenology, the methodological framework underpinning this study, aims to systematically explore individuals' lived experiences within specific contexts, with the objective of unveiling the underlying meaning of these experiences (van Manen, 2016), and enabling researchers to examine and comprehend these experiences (Smith et al., 2009). In the present study, data were collected through interviews. The present study employs a phenomenological approach, focusing on the lived experiences of individuals working within an organisation that is committed to the practice of servant leadership. The transcripts of all interviews were analysed and interpreted. Furthermore, reflective notes were recorded using a digital audio recorder.

A total of sixteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, including four follow-up interviews, with a total of seven female and five male employees (see Table 1). The duration of each interview ranged from 40 minutes to 70 minutes. All interviewees involved in the study were in possession of either a university degree or a professional certification, and had been employed by the organisation for a period ranging from a couple of years to several decades.

The interviewees were divided into two groups: half of them held management roles, while the other half occupied non-management positions. The integration of both groups was imperative, as servant leadership engages individuals at all levels of the organisation (Greenleaf, 1970). In order to ensure the maintenance of confidentiality, the subjects of the study were given pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted in a single meeting room at the organisation's headquarters. The interviewees were asked a series of questions related to their personal development, their experiences with workplace interactions and challenges, the importance attributed to decision-making, and the manner in which organisational goals are established. Furthermore, all interviewees were invited to share their understanding of servant leadership and describe how they have experienced its practice within the organisation. During the course of the interviews, the employees in question appeared to be at ease and were able to express themselves openly and candidly. The interviewees represented a variety of roles within the organisation, including CEO, chairman, marketing director, project managers, architects, and engineers.

Interviews were interpreted according to the phenomenological methodology of *description*, *reduction*, and *interpretation* (Lanigan, 1988; Orbe, 1998). In the *description* phase, the transcripts and notes are analysed and synthesised into a cohesive narrative, in which it is important to suspend all presuppositions and be aware of biases and subjectivity (Kristjánsdóttir & DeTurk, 2013). This is achieved by setting aside any preconceptions about the phenomenon under study that could cloud the impartial interpretation of lived experience (Lanigan, 1988). In the phenomenological *reduction,* which is the second phase, it is decided which part of the description is most important; this includes examining all narratives to determine essential themes (Lanigan, 1988). In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of introspective reflection in accessing the meaning of one's experience. The act of reflection on an experience occurs in the present moment, rendering the moment itself imperceptible to introspection (van Manen, 2017). The challenge, therefore, lies in the recovery of the meaning of past moments into pure descriptions, as phenomenology is the study of people's conscious experience (van Manen, 2014). *Interpretation* is the final phase, where meanings that were ambiguous or not exposed in previous phases are thematised and the themes connected both to one another and to the research question (Lanigan, 1988; van Manen, 2016). The objective is to decipher the implicit meaning or latent essence of a given phenomenon, and to interpret its significance (van Manen, 2016). Consequently, this final phase entails the refinement of the fundamental themes to identify the salient aspects of the studied phenomenon (Lanigan, 1988; van Manen, 2016).

Table 1
Overview of the interviewees

Name	Gender	Role	Work experience
George	Male	Manager	Over five years of work experience
Anne	Female	Non-Manager	Over five years of work experience
Mary	Female	Manager	Less than five years of work experience
Michael	Male	Manager	Over five years of work experience
Andrew	Male	Non-Manager	Over five years of work experience
Sheila	Female	Non-Manager	Over five years of work experience
Simon	Male	Non-Manager	Less than five years of work experience
Nancy	Female	Non-Manager	Over five years of work experience
Kevin	Male	Manager	Over five years of work experience
Olivia	Female	Manager	Over five years of work experience
Emma	Female	Manager	Over five years of work experience
Lily	Female	Non-Manager	Less than five years of work experience
Anne	Female	Non-Manager	Follow-up Interview
Emma	Female	Manager	Follow-up Interview
Mary	Female	Manager	Follow-up Interview
Michael	Male	Manager	Follow-up Interview

The study also included an *abductive approach* in the form of the aforementioned follow-up interviews. The objective of the study was to enhance comprehension of the participants' servant leadership practices, as an abductive approach enables researchers to explore further explanations by returning to earlier stages of the research process (Bamberger, 2018; Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

4. Results

The participants in this study described their experience of servant leadership as a practice guided by the principles of servant leadership, interwoven with Christian values, and focused on ethical behaviour. It is this combination of elements that forms the guiding principles of the organisation. This experience leads participants to the conclusion that they are practising servant leadership through the Golden Rule, with a focus on what they think is right. Collectively, these elements function as a compass for their practice. The two themes discussed below represent the organisation's core guiding principles and reveal employees' experiences of its servant leadership practices. The themes are: "Treat others how you wish to be treated" and *doing the right thing*.

"Treat Others How You Wish to Be Treated"

Participants in the study revealed that the organisation's servant leadership practices are guided by religious principles and Christian values, which have become embedded in its culture. Michael talks about how Christianity influences at work: "Christ was a servant first, and that just influenced me and has my entire life ... and I don't hesitate to tell people where that came from [servant leadership]". As the organisation's founder and former CEO, Michael emphasises the importance of communicating this message to every employee. He believes that servant leadership should be grounded in Christian values. A significant proportion of the study's participants concur with Olivia's perspective that servant leadership encompasses not only the act of serving, but also the act of leading, while concomitantly associating it with Christian principles. Olivia describes this when speaking about the nature of servant leadership and its practical application in the workplace, stating that people tend to portray servant leadership as more complex than it is.

People overcomplicate it because servant leadership is just exactly like you learned in Sunday school ... Treat other people the way you wish you were being treated ... it's a pretty old model, right? It's the Christ model ... of the Christian tradition.

Emma further emphasised the significance of the message of treating others as one would prefer to be treated, stating that every employee was obligated to read about and discuss servant leadership with their colleagues, as well as attend special classes on the subject.

When talking about the role of servant leadership in their workplace, Kevin also expresses that "Treat others how you wish to be treated" is one of the main pillars of their practice of servant leadership, and that it is the foundational pillar of their culture. He underlines that it is about: "Serve, then lead". Kevin's words reflect a willingness and confidence in combining the serving and leading aspects of servant leadership, suggesting that participants should focus on both.

Table 2
Themes – overview of the analysis

Themes	Quotes	Interpretation
"Treat others how you wish to be treated"	"People overcomplicate it because servant leadership is just exactly like you learned in Sunday school... Treat others how you wish to be treated... it's a pretty old model, right? It's the Christ model... of the Christian tradition" "Christ was a servant first, and that just influenced me and has my entire life... and I don't hesitate to tell people where that came from [servant leadership]"	Gives employees a meaningful work-life and motivates them to serve one another and practice servant leadership Provides employees with clear guidelines on how to practice servant leadership by looking to the Golden Rule Allows employees to practice their faith at work
Doing the right thing	"I've never questioned where I work due to ethics… I have never once felt that there was anything in the office that would make me question is this the place, is this a place of value?" "It's just a, it's a given. It's assumed that you would never do anything unethical…"	Employees focus on what they think is right to do at work, and they feel it is the natural thing to do Employees relate being ethical with the Golden Rule, so they integrate it with their servant leadership practices Aligns with the concept of agapao love

Over the years, the principles of servant leadership have been passed on to new employees, consistently linking them to the Golden Rule and emphasising their Christian roots. Many interviewees confirmed this connection, such as Anne, who stated: "We [employees] believe that Christ was a servant leader".

The participants' words make it clear that employees at Penz do not want to be self-centred; they show respect for others and accept their interests and needs. In short, the study participants relate the practice of servant leadership to Christian values. This combination gives them the determination, strength and confidence to serve and lead, and provides them with a sense of purpose and meaning at work.

Doing the Right Thing

Many participants expressed their willingness to openly and frankly discuss issues with each other at work. They prefer straightforward communication and feel that problems should not be ignored. Kevin underlines this practice and describes the experience in this regard:

We communicate a lot ... we're pretty open and transparent how we work and operate ... we certainly use technology but ... I'm not going to ... rely on emails and things like that to really discuss something, I want to sit down and have a conversation ... so I would tend to do that in a very personal way, one on one ... or as a group ... some of that may be in a, in a just "let's have a quick meeting" ... and some might be ... a very informal type of conversation. But usually I like to start very conversational.

Participants connect openness to ethical behaviour at work. It is evident that they perceive ethical conduct as an inherent aspect of their behaviour, seemingly t aking it for granted. Consequently, the acceptance

of unethical behaviour would be regarded as both unthinkable and unacceptable. As underlined by Mary when asked about doing what is right at work: "It's just a, it's a given. It's assumed that you would never do anything unethical … I would never put myself in a position where that [acting unethically], whenever, be a question". Similarly, Sheila expressed that asking about ethical behaviour at work feels strange, given that acting unethically is unheard of within the organisation.:

I think that's an odd question ... because I don't think it would ever come up to be a conversation ... in my seventeen years I can't remember anything that we've ever done that I would have been ashamed to say we did. And I don't even remember having a conversation [about] whether we should do something or not.

Sheila's words suggest that acting unethically is simply not an option. She then explains that this relates to servant leadership: those who embrace it know what it means and will not act inappropriately at work because they are motivated to care for each other and want their colleagues to be happy and succeed. Therefore, the focus is on showing support and caring for each other as they take pride in being ethical:

You can call anybody in this office up at two a.m. in the morning and ask them the company philosophy and everybody is gonna spout out the term servant leadership ... I've not heard anything like that [referring to unethical behaviour] ... I just see a culture ... of compassionate and caring individuals. Caring about the company and caring about the people.

These words are indicative of authenticity in interactions between employees, as they aim to be

true and ethical. Nancy echoes the same thing when talking about ethics in the workplace: "I don't know if I've ever had, at least as part of working here, an ethical dilemma". Anne underlines the same: "I've never questioned where I work due to ethics".

In summary, participants perceive the practice of good ethics as both natural and essential to their professional conduct, perceiving it as the optimal approach and the appropriate course of action. Consequently, they are motivated to adhere to ethical principles in their workplace.

5. Discussion

The present study sought to understand how employees experience working in an organisation committed to servant leadership, with particular attention to the guiding principles that shape their practice. The findings demonstrate that servant leadership in this organisation is integrated with Christian values, including ethical behaviour. The organisation's guiding principles are formed by these elements. In summary, these guiding principles are rooted in the Golden Rule and the significance of ethical conduct.

The participants experience that their practice of servant leadership is guided by the principles of servant leadership and interwoven with Christian values. This perspective is consistent with Greenleaf's (2008) conceptualisations of servant leadership, in which he posits Jesus Christ and other exemplars as archetypal representations of a servant leader. Moreover, a substantial body of research supports this correlation, emphasising Jesus Christ as a servant leader (e.g., Benson, 2021; Lanctot & Irving, 2010; Sun, 2013). The integration of faith and work was perceived as beneficial by many participants, as it facilitated the articulation of religious values through servant leadership in the workplace. This suggests that employees exhibit consideration towards their colleagues and derive satisfaction from collaborative endeavours. These experiences reflect the *building community* element of Laub's model (1999), which emphasises collaboration and interpersonal connection in the workplace. Furthermore, participants described a sense of shared contribution towards common goals, which corresponds with the *providing* leadership element of Laub's model (1999). Employees reported having a clear vision and well-defined objectives, which guided their collective actions. Although earlier empirical studies have not established a link between Christian values and the practice of servant leadership, several scholars have recognised and documented this association (e.g., Benson, 2021; Nordbye & Irving, 2017; Sun, 2013).

Employees articulated the significance of reciprocating the manner in which they would like to be treated in the workplace. This perspective reflects a fundamental element of servant leadership, namely the prioritisation of service to others and the fulfilment of their essential needs (Greenleaf, 1970). This is rooted in an orientation towards others as part of the altruistic behaviour of servant leaders (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Beck, 2014; Lu et al., 2024). It sheds light on the link between altruism in business and the classical, widespread principle of the Golden Rule: "Treat others how you wish to be treated" (Goodman, 2014, p. 381). This further emphasises the importance of mutual support, collaboration, and the principle of leading through service. This helps employees find a sense of purpose and meaning at work (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017). This outlook is supported by several studies emphasising the importance of employee welfare and the desire of servant leaders to see their colleagues succeed (e.g., Beck, 2014; Black, 2010; Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Giolito et al., 2020; Greenleaf, 1970).

Participants in the study believe that incorporating their Christian values into their practice of servant leadership is important. They believe that these guidelines are significant because they are associated with their success within the organisation. To our knowledge, this is the first study to highlight the interweaving of servant leadership and Christian values, including ethical behaviour, to form guiding principles for the organisation. These guiding principles for the practice of servant leadership resemble Covey's (1999) *principle-centred leadership* at four levels: organisational, managerial, interpersonal, and personal. Additionally, these principles align with Blanchard and Broadwell's (2018) perspective that organisational values serve as guiding principles for servant leadership. Consequently, Penz's principles are rooted in servant leadership and Christian values, which are evident in their daily practice of servant leadership.

Participants experience being righteous and doing what they believe to be right as one of the cornerstones of their servant leadership practice, and feel that it is the only way to act in a manner that demonstrates their care for each other. This study's findings regarding the inclusion of ethical behaviour correspond with previous research indicating that doing the right thing is a core element of servant leadership (Hakanen & Van Dierendonck, 2011; Lemoine et al., 2025; Liden et al., 2025; Parris & Peachey, 2013). This is also in line with Laub's (1999) model, where the servant leadership characteristic of *valuing people* includes the act of showing care and compassion to others. The findings also indicate an association between ethical behaviour and the aforementioned Golden Rule (Goodman, 2014), as demonstrated by employees' willingness to empathise with others and act in accordance with their own moral principles (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Beck, 2014).

This altruistic behaviour is characteristic of servant leaders (Beck, 2014). This demonstrates employees' commitment to fostering a supportive environment and promoting each other's professional growth. This can be linked to the concept of *compassionate love*, which is considered important for the relationship between servant leaders and followers (Patterson & van Dierendonck, 2015). Furthermore, this is related to agapao love, the Greek term for moral love (Winston, 2003), which is also an unselfish love (Patterson, 2003). This corresponds to the notion that servant leaders prioritise service, a concept that encompasses qualities such as humility, empathy and love (Lemoine et al., 2021; Sun, 2013). This approach aligns with an others-oriented paradigm, characterised by a genuine desire to serve and support the growth of others (Greenleaf, 1970), as well as the concept of authenticity, defined as the act of openly revealing oneself and remaining true to one's word (Lee et al., 2020; van Dierendonck, 2011).

Participants have revealed that employees enjoy working together, which means they care for one another and show interest in the work of their fellow workers, as well as being willing to help anytime when needed. This assertion is corroborated by the findings of Carter and Baghurst (2014), which demonstrate that the practice of servant leadership entails the collaborative efforts of individuals to establish positive working relationships. Furthermore, this perspective aligns with the observations of Irving and Longbotham (2007), who contend that servant leaders aspire to foster an environment characterised by fairness and effective collaboration. This finding aligns with the results of other studies on the subject of servant leadership, which demonstrate that employees assist one another at work while striving to achieve their objectives (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2024; Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2025; Ragnarsson et al., 2023). Participants are encouraged to recognise their limitations and acknowledge that success at work is not achieved by undertaking all tasks independently. Instead, they are taught to place reliance on their colleagues. This aligns with Laub's (2018) characteristic of *sharing leadership* and the concept of humility, which, for example, means the willingness to accept one's limitations and be ready to trust and depend on others.

Finally, it is noteworthy to mention that Penz's guiding principles provide employees with a purposeful work life, aligning with Greenleaf (2003) and Sendjaya (2010), who argue that servant leadership can serve *a higher purpose* and give people meaning in their work. This assertion is further substantiated by the findings of Sousa and van Dierendonck (2017), who determined that the notion of servant leadership confers a sense of purpose to professional endeavours through the paradigm of stewardship.

6. Conclusions

This study contributes to the extant literature on the subject by extending the understanding and knowledge of the employees' experience of the practice of servant leadership. The study demonstrates that the organisation's daily guiding principles are rooted in servant leadership, interwoven with Christian values, and include a focus on ethical behaviour. These guiding principles enable employees to serve and *lead* – the two key aspects of servant leadership – and allow them to practise their faith at work. While previous publications have linked Christian values to servant leadership (Benson, 2021; Nordbye & Irving, 2017; Sun, 2013), no prior empirical studies have demonstrated a direct link between servant leadership and Christianity. This study highlights this link for the first time. Furthermore, the present study corroborates the notion that adherence to ethical principles constitutes a cornerstone of the philosophy and praxis of servant leadership, a concept that has been previously substantiated in numerous studies (e.g., Hakanen & van Dierendonck, 2011; Lemoine et al., 2025; Liden et al., 2025; Parris & Peachey, 2013).

The study offers practical implications. The organisation's daily guiding principles of demonstrating the Golden Rule and doing the right thing instil a sense of confidence and courage in employees, enabling them to demonstrate initiative at work. This, in turn, enables them to serve and lead, the cornerstones of servant leadership. Their practice of servant leadership emphasises the importance of prioritising employee well-being (e.g., Eva et al., 2019; Flynn et al., 2016; Giolito et al., 2020) and shows that acting ethically at work – including practising agapao love (Patterson & van Dierendonck, 2015; Singh et al., 2017; Winston, 2003) – is a key part of servant leadership. Furthermore, the guiding principles show that a focus on collaboration among employees, along with fairness, trust, transparency, and shared responsibility, is essential for the practice of servant leadership. In summary, the integration of the principle of treating others as one wishes to be treated, with a focus on ethical conduct, serves to emphasise the practical contribution of this study.

It is recommended that future research on the practice of servant leadership be informed by the following observations. The present study examined a servant leadership organisation in the business sector that practices servant leadership grounded in Christian values. The exploration of disparate manifestations of servant leadership organisations, notably those not founded on Christian principles and operating under distinct conditions, may yield varied employee experiences. Furthermore, research involving servant leadership organisations in the consumer business sector, or those serving both

the business-to-business and business-to-consumer markets, may provide additional insights, as this study focused on an organisation in the business-to-business market. Future research could also explore how servant-led organisations balance serving and leading. For example, it would be interesting to ascertain whether that balance shifts when serving for-profit versus non-profit organisations. It is evident that the continuation of research in these domains would facilitate a more profound comprehension of the manner in which servant leadership is employed in varied contexts.

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