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# Evidence-Based Servant Leadership: Development, Mechanisms, and Constraints

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## ABSTRACT:

**Background:** Whether servant leadership is innate or can be deliberately developed is a central question for organizations seeking both high performance and a healthy culture. Contemporary scholarship conceptualizes servant leadership as a behavioral philosophy that encompasses empowerment, humility, stewardship, interpersonal acceptance, and clarity rather than a fixed personality type.

**Methods:** This narrative review synthesized peer-reviewed research, integrative reviews, and meta-analyses on servant leadership, focusing on (a) teachable micro-behaviors, (b) organizational conditions that sustain behavior change, and (c) boundaries where selection and accountability are preferable to training. Key databases and leadership journals were searched for studies on servant leadership, leader humility, psychological safety, and leadership development effectiveness.

**Results:** Servant leadership behaviors such as deep listening, empowering with guardrails, coaching, transparent decision-making, and humility-in-action are trainable through high-frequency practice and reinforced by validated instruments. These practices reliably enhance psychological safety and team outcomes. However, durable impact requires alignment with organizational systems, including hiring profiles, onboarding, 360-degree feedback, promotion criteria, and meeting norms. Certain dispositions, including integrity, genuine humility, and respect for others, emerge as non-teachables; they must be addressed through selection and accountability rather than curriculum. Tolerating incivility, even from high performers, undermines retention and innovation.

**Conclusion:** Servant leadership is teachable when approached as both behavioral training and system change. Organizations should adopt a dual strategy: train observable servant behaviors while wiring systems that reward them, and hire/promote for the non-negotiables that training cannot manufacture. This integrated approach shifts servant leadership from an aspirational philosophy to a scalable, durable operating system.

**KEYWORDS:** *Servant Leadership; Leadership Development; Psychological Safety; Humility; Organizational Systems; Integrity; Non-negotiables*

## INTRODUCTION:

Whether servant leadership can be developed or is largely innate remains a practical question for organizations that want high performance and a healthy culture. The modern literature treats servant leadership as a behavioral philosophy prioritizing the growth and well-being of followers and communities rather than a fixed personality type (Greenleaf, 1970; van Dierendonck, 2011). Core elements recur across frameworks: empowerment, humility, interpersonal acceptance/compassion, stewardship and moral action, and providing direction with clarity and fairness (Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). This positioning differentiates servant leadership from adjacent styles (transformational, ethical, authentic) while acknowledging overlap in values and outcomes (Hoch et al., 2018; van Dierendonck, 2011). Importantly, validated instruments now allow researchers and practitioners to describe, observe, and measure these behaviors, moving the construct from slogan to practice (Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

The interest is not merely theoretical. Organizations face a dual mandate: deliver results while safeguarding trust, inclusion, and learning. Servant leadership promises both by fostering psychological safety, voice, and discretionary effort, drivers of quality, innovation, and retention (Edmondson, 1999; Eva et al., 2019). Meta-analytic work indicates servant leadership contributes unique variance in outcomes beyond neighboring leadership styles, suggesting there is a teachable, executable skill set worth investing in (Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). That claim, however, raises two thorny issues that practitioners routinely encounter: (1) What, exactly, is teachable? and (2) What depends more on selection and character than on training?

A second reason this question matters is implementation risk. **Many organizations run workshops that inspire in the room but fade at the desk.** Evidence from leader-development research shows that durable change depends on

aligning mindsets, micro-skills, and the management system (hiring, feedback, incentives, promotion criteria, and meeting norms) (Day, 2014; Avolio & Hannah, 2008). Without system alignment, even well-trained leaders regress to local norms under pressure; with alignment, ordinary managers can reliably demonstrate servant behaviors in everyday decisions (Day, 2014).

Finally, the field benefits from clarity about mechanisms and boundaries. Mechanisms such as psychological safety and leader humility-in-action appear central to how servant leadership improves learning and performance (Edmondson, 1999; Owens et al., 2013; Owens & Hekman, 2016). At the same time, certain dispositions (integrity, basic regard for people, willingness to learn) may be prerequisites rather than outcomes of training (Roberts et al., 2006; Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). This review, therefore, takes a pragmatic stance: it synthesizes what the literature says about teachability, identifies behaviors that can be trained and routinized, names the likely non-teachables that should inform selection and advancement, and offers an implementation playbook that connects evidence to practice.

## METHODS

This brief review used a rapid, narrative approach to synthesize what is known about the teachability of servant leadership and the system conditions that sustain it (Day, 2014). The guiding question was: *Which elements of servant leadership can be deliberately taught and embedded, and which elements depend more on selection and character than on training?*

We included English-language, peer-reviewed scholarship and seminal essays that (a) defined servant leadership or closely adjacent constructs (e.g., leader humility), (b) examined mechanisms relevant to teachability (e.g., psychological safety), or (c) evaluated leadership-development

effectiveness (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Edmondson, 1999; Owens et al., 2013). We prioritized integrative reviews, meta-analyses, and validated measures and supplemented with high-credibility practitioner pieces when they clarified implementation (Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; van Dierendonck, 2011; Liden et al., 2008).

Between August and September 2025, we searched publisher platforms and indexes commonly used in leadership research (e.g., *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of Management*, *Organization Science*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*) using combined construct/mechanism terms such as “servant leadership” AND (teach\* OR develop\*), “leader humility” AND (team performance OR psychological safety), “psychological safety” AND (leadership OR intervention), and “leadership development” AND (effectiveness OR transfer OR readiness) (Day, 2014).

Titles/abstracts were screened for relevance to teachability and culture change; full texts were then reviewed against inclusion criteria. Preference was given to works offering (1) construct clarity (definitions, validated scales), (2) evidence of outcomes or mechanisms (e.g., links to safety, performance, voice), and (3) implications for practice (transfer, system alignment) (Eva et al., 2019; Hoch et al., 2018). Practitioner sources were retained only when recommendations converged with peer-reviewed evidence.

From each source we charted: construct definition, study design, context, measures, focal mechanisms, outcomes, and practical levers (training content, routines, incentives). Findings were organized into teachables (mindsets, micro-skills, routines) and non-teachables/selection priorities (character, enduring traits) and mapped to system levers (hiring, feedback/360s, promotion criteria, meeting norms). Given the heterogeneity of designs, we used thematic synthesis rather than quantitative meta-analysis (Day, 2014). To privilege stronger evidence, we weighted meta-analyses, validated measures, and multi-study programs more heavily

than single studies and noted risks of construct overlap and publication bias (Hoch et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019).

We treat servant leadership as a behavioral philosophy characterized by empowerment, humility, stewardship, interpersonal acceptance, and providing direction (van Dierendonck, 2011; Liden et al., 2008). Teachability denotes behaviors and mindsets that can be specified, practiced, observed, and reinforced through training and system design; non-teachables refer to relatively stable dispositions better handled via selection and accountability (Roberts et al., 2006).

## RESULTS:

Servant leadership includes trainable behaviors and mindsets. Across studies and validated scales, the construct resolves into observable practices that can be specified, modeled, rehearsed, and assessed: deep listening, empowerment with guardrails, developing people via coaching, stewardship and decision transparency, authenticity, and humility-in-action (Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Multi-dimensional instruments (e.g., SLS; Liden et al., 2008) allow baseline and follow-up assessments at individual and team levels (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Proposed Training Map for Developing Servant Leaders

SELF (Inner Stance)	OTHERS (Interpersonal Behavior)	RESULTS/GOVERNANCE (Systems and Clarity)
Humility in Practice	Active Listening & Presence	Service Orientation
Ethical Courage	Empathy & Perspective Taking	Empowerment & Clear Delegation
Stewardship	Psychological Safety	Fairness & Consistency
Gratitude & Recognition	Coaching & Development	Clarity in Direction

Meta-analytic evidence shows servant leadership explains additional variance in satisfaction, commitment, citizenship, and performance beyond transformational, ethical, and authentic leadership,

supporting a distinct, teachable profile (Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020).

Servant behaviors reliably increase psychological safety, the shared belief that it's safe to speak up, by pairing high standards with high support (Edmondson, 1999). Non-defensive responses, thanking dissent, and brief after-action reviews are associated with greater voice and learning, whereas dismissiveness and status displays depress them (Edmondson, 1999). In parallel, leader-expressed humility, acknowledging limits, crediting others, and seeking input, improves team processes and outcomes via social contagion (Owens et al., 2013; Owens & Hekman, 2016). These elements are coachable via brief, high-frequency clinics and reinforced with observation checklists (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Day, 2014).

**Training alone fades unless the surrounding people and systems reward the new behavior.** Readiness to learn, in-role practice, and alignment of selection, feedback, incentives, and opportunities predict transfer (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Day, 2014). Programs that pair skill training with process changes (hiring profiles, 360s, promotion criteria, decision norms) show more durable effects than workshops alone (Day, 2014; Eva et al., 2019). Manager scorecards that weigh people outcomes (psychological safety, engagement, mobility, regrettable attrition) alongside business results help sustain the shift (Day, 2014).

Evidence on personality stability and values suggests limits to trainability: core ethics, genuine humility, and steady regard for others are better addressed through selection and accountability than curriculum (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000; Roberts et al., 2006). Short-format training rarely shifts entrenched dominance/defensiveness; under pressure, people revert to defaults (Roberts et al., 2006). Tolerating incivility, the “brilliant jerk” problem, erodes creativity, effort, and retention even when results look strong in the short term (Porath & Pearson, 2013). Hence, hire/advance for non-teachables and train the teachables (Eva et al., 2019).

## DISCUSSION

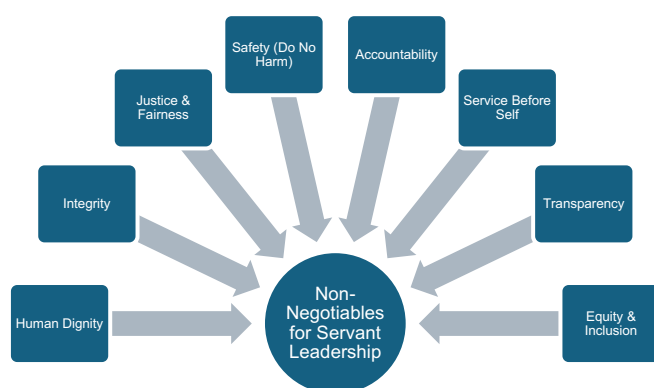
This review suggests that servant leadership is best understood as a trainable repertoire of behaviors that produce value when they are practiced consistently and supported by organizational systems. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that servant leadership contributes incremental variance in key outcomes beyond adjacent styles (Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, & Wu, 2018; Lee, Lyubovnikova, Tian, & Knight, 2020), while mechanism studies point to psychological safety and leader humility as the principal pathways linking behavior to performance (Edmondson, 1999; Owens & Hekman, 2016). Taken together, these findings shift the practical question from “*Can we teach it?*” to “*How do we make it stick?*”

First, development efforts should target micro-behaviors: listen first, empower with guardrails, coach in 1:1s, decide transparently, recognize specifically, and practice humility-in-action paired with frequent, real-work rehearsal (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Second, durability depends on system alignment: selection profiles that probe *how* results were achieved, onboarding that requires early listening tours, behavior-based 360s, promotion criteria that weight people's outcomes, and meeting norms that institutionalize voice (Day, 2014). Third, organizations should select and advance for non-teachables a steady ethical compass and genuine humility because stable personality tendencies change slowly and often resist short-form training (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006; Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). Finally, tolerating incivility for the sake of short-term output is self-defeating; the performance and retention costs are well documented (Porath & Pearson, 2013).

**Servant leadership is sometimes misread as permissiveness.** The literature and practice guidance reviewed here emphasize high standards with elevated support, clarity of direction, and accountability alongside humility and care

(Greenleaf, 1970; van Dierendonck, 2011). Effects may be moderated by task interdependence, uncertainty, and power distance; for instance, psychologically safe routines (leader goes last, brief after-action reviews) are likely to matter more in high-interdependence, knowledge-intensive settings (Edmondson, 1999). Hybrid and distributed teams amplify the value of explicit recognition and decision transparency, which substitutes for lost hallway context (Day, 2014). Future research should test these moderators directly.

Figure 1: The core elements that do not flex with context or pressure, the non-negotiables for servant leadership



**Organizations often falter when they treat servant leadership as a workshop, not a system change, lacking inspiration without incentives or artifacts** (Day, 2014). Other derailers include performative humility (language without behavior), reliance on a single champion instead of distributed practice, and the “brilliant jerk” exception that silently rewrites the culture (Porath & Pearson, 2013). Mitigations include small, visible rituals (e.g., two genuine questions before advice; decision logs), lightweight measurement (safety pulse, follow-through rate), and explicit consequences for disrespect regardless of results (Edmondson, 1999; Avolio & Hannah, 2008). As a companion to the teachable behaviors, the **core elements that do not**

**flex with context or pressure** for servant leadership are non-negotiable (Figure 1).

Several questions still warrant rigorous field experimentation:

- What practice cadence and duration yield sustained behavior change? (Avolio & Hannah, 2008).
- To what extent do psychological safety and humility mediate effects on performance across industries and cultures? (Edmondson, 1999; Owens & Hekman, 2016).
- How do character-based hiring signals (integrity, humility) combine with training to predict outcomes? (Roberts et al., 2006).
- What are the net effects on retention, quality, cycle time, and innovation relative to other leadership investments? (Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020).
- Will continued refinement of behavior-based servant leadership scales and multi-source designs help reduce construct overlap and common-method bias? (Liden et al., 2008; Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2019).

The most defensible, evidence-aligned stance is twofold: ***train the behaviors and wire the system, while hiring/promoting for the character you cannot manufacture***. When servant behaviors are routinized through meeting norms and reinforced by selection, feedback, and rewards, the mechanisms of safety and humility become self-sustaining, and servant leadership shifts from philosophy to operating system (Day, 2014; Eva et al., 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Yes, servant leadership can be taught, but only when organizations treat it as trainable behaviors embedded in a supportive system, not a one-off workshop or personality makeover (Day, 2014; Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The practical recipe is to define a small set of concrete behaviors (listen first, empower with



guardrails, coach in 1:1s, decide transparently, recognize specifically, practice humility-in-action); ritualize them in the cadence of work (leader speaks last, five-minute after-action reviews, weekly values-based shout-outs); and wire them into hiring, onboarding, feedback/360s, promotion criteria, and manager scorecards that weight people outcomes alongside business results (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Day, 2014).

At the same time, there are non-teachables that belong in selection and advancement: a steady ethical compass, genuine humility, and durable respect for others (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000; Roberts et al., 2006). **Because entrenched dominance and chronic incivility rarely shift with short-form training and reliably degrade performance, organizations should hire for character, train for skill, and enforce clear standards that make disrespect unacceptable** (Porath & Pearson, 2013). With a two-track approach that includes the development of micro-skills through high-frequency practice and measurement, and system alignment so servant behaviors are unavoidable, servant leadership becomes teachable, scalable, and durable (Eva et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020).

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