

Servant leadership is good for business—and women are better at it

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For decades, studies have shown men are more likely than women to be perceived as good leaders—even when they do or say the same things. But when it comes to servant leadership, women have the advantage, according to new research from the University at Buffalo School of Management.

"When people think of a strong leader, many people subconsciously picture a man because of persistent stereotypes of men as commanding and goal-focused," says Jim Lemoine, Ph.D., assistant professor of organization and human resources in the UB School of Management. "Meanwhile, because they're seen as more caring and people-focused, women have always faced a disadvantage—or outright discrimination—as leaders."

Servant leadership seemingly flips that stereotype on its head, as servant leaders achieve organizational goals while prioritizing their community and empowering people on their team, in the organization and in society at large. Today, many employees prefer and work harder for leaders who value ethics and relationships,

causing some large organizations, such as Delta and Intel, to adopt servant leadership within their management teams.

Lemoine and his co-author, Terry Blum, Ph.D., professor and the Tedd Munchak Chair in Entrepreneurship in Georgia Tech's Scheller College of Business, wanted to see if this communal style of leadership would eliminate the unconscious bias against [women leaders](#).

The study, which appears online ahead of its upcoming publication in *Personnel Psychology*, looked at 415 employees and 109 managers across six organizations. The researchers measured each individual's servant leadership on a sliding scale, as well as their job performance and the gender make-up of teams.

The data showed—for the first time—that servant leaders inspire their followers to become servant leaders themselves, something scholars have been theorizing since Robert Greenleaf first coined the term almost 50 years ago.

In particular, the study found women leaders were more effective than men at driving performance by creating servant leaders on their team.

"As followers began acting like [servant leaders](#), they became more engaged, proactive and productive—and women were better than men at sparking that change," Lemoine says. "[Research consistently shows](#) that [gender stereotypes](#) give men a leadership advantage. Here, those same stereotypes finally give women an edge."

Lemoine says organizations should consider adding servant leadership training for supervisors and employees, especially in professional development programs targeted at women. He cautions, however, that their research showed servant leadership may be more powerful in people-focused sectors, like health care and education,

than some blue-collar industries.

"While the positive effects of servant leadership are undeniable, it's not a one-size-fits-all solution," Lemoine says. "But, for [women](#) who have struggled with gendered expectations of leaders, servant [leadership](#) may be an ideal style to invert and overcome those stereotypes."

More information: G. James Lemoine et al. Servant leadership, leader gender, and team gender role: Testing a female advantage in a cascading model of performance, *Personnel Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/peps.12379](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12379)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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