

A Comparison of the Effectiveness of Agile Leadership and Servant Leadership in Project Management

Wenqi Li¹

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Abstract

This paper delves into the comparative efficacy of agile leadership and servant leadership within the realm of project management. Agile leadership underscores adaptability, collaboration, and delivery of customer value, while servant leadership centers on serving team members, nurturing their development, and cultivating a supportive atmosphere. This investigation scrutinizes pertinent literature, presents findings from recent projects, and offers insights into the advantages and constraints of both leadership approaches. The result suggests that while agile leadership excels in dynamic, fast-paced settings, servant leadership fosters team cohesion and enduring success. The paper concludes with recommendations for project managers to select the appropriate leadership style based on project requirements.

Keywords: Agile leadership, servant leadership, project management, effectiveness.

JEL Classification: D23, M10, M11, M12, M14.

1. Introduction

Project management requires effective leadership to guide teams, manage resources, and achieve project objectives. Leadership styles play a pivotal role in shaping project outcomes, team performance, and organizational success. Among the various leadership approaches, agile leadership and servant leadership stand out as two prominent paradigms, each offering unique strategies for managing teams and driving project success.

Agile Leadership is derived from the principles of the Agile Manifesto (Beck et al., 2001), which emphasizes flexibility, collaboration with customers, and iterative progress. Agile leaders prioritize creating adaptive teams capable of responding to change swiftly and efficiently. This leadership style fosters a culture of continuous improvement through feedback loops and iterative cycles that drive project development. By empowering teams to make decisions, agile leaders encourage innovation and responsiveness to evolving market demands (Rigby, Sutherland, & Noble, 2018).

Conversely, Servant Leadership, as conceptualized by Greenleaf (2002), prioritizes the growth and well-being of team members. This leadership approach adopts a people-first philosophy, where leaders serve their teams to foster a supportive and nurturing environment. Servant leaders emphasize empathy, active listening, and stewardship to build a strong sense of community and shared purpose within their teams. Research associate's servant leadership with enhanced employee engagement (Eva et al., 2019), increased job satisfaction (Chan & Mak, 2014), improved loyalty (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022), and long-term organizational health.

The aim of this paper is to compare agile leadership and servant leadership, focusing on their core principles, advantages, and limitations. The study examines existing literature, real-world project examples, and critically evaluates how these leadership styles influence project outcomes. By understanding these dynamics, project managers can make informed decisions on selecting the most appropriate leadership approach for their projects.

¹ Business and Management Faculty, Yorkville University, wenqi.li@yorkvilleu.ca

This comparison is particularly relevant in today's fast-paced and complex project environments, where adaptability and team cohesion are critical. Agile leadership is predominantly applied in industries such as technology and software development, where rapid iteration and customer feedback are essential for success (Hilton, 2024). In contrast, servant leadership is more prevalent in organizations with decentralized structures, such as healthcare, education, and non-profit sectors, where employee development and long-term sustainability are prioritized (Eva et al., 2018). The role of communication is equally vital in both leadership styles (Haq & Faizan, 2023).

The paper is organized into four key sections:

Literature Review: This section explores the theoretical foundations and practical applications of agile and servant leadership styles.

Methodology: The methodology outlines the approach used to collect and analyze data, including the selection of case studies and relevant metrics.

Findings and Discussion: This section presents the results of the analysis, comparing and contrasting agile and servant leadership based on real-world examples.

Conclusion and Recommendations: The final section summarizes key insights and offers practical recommendations for project managers on selecting and implementing the appropriate leadership style based on their specific project requirements.

By analyzing the nuances of agile and servant leadership, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on effective leadership in project management. The findings provide valuable insights for both practitioners and scholars, equipping them with knowledge to enhance project outcomes and foster organizational success.

2. Literature Review

Agile Leadership originated from the Agile software development movement and emphasized adaptive planning, evolutionary development, early delivery, and continuous improvement (Beck et al., 2001). Agile leaders play a pivotal role in fostering collaboration, empowering teams, and driving customer-centric outcomes. They create environments that adapt swiftly to change, encourage innovation, and remove impediments that hinder team progress. This ensures that teams remain focused on delivering value to customers. Agile leadership is characterized by a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness, making it particularly effective in dynamic and fast-paced project environments (Rigby, Sutherland, & Noble, 2018).

Specific Agile methodologies, such as Scrum and Kanban, have further refined the practices of Agile Leadership. Scrum emphasizes iterative progress through sprints and regular feedback loops, enabling teams to remain aligned with project goals and adapt to changes efficiently (Hilton, 2024). Kanban focuses on visualizing work, limiting work in progress, and managing workflow to enhance efficiency and productivity. Prominent companies like Spotify and Google have successfully implemented these methodologies, leveraging Agile Leadership to foster innovation and deliver high-quality products rapidly.

Servant Leadership, introduced by Greenleaf (1970), emphasizes the leader's role as a caretaker and supporter of their team (Greenleaf, 2002). This leadership style prioritizes the needs and development of team members, fostering a culture of trust and respect. Servant leaders actively engage in listening, empathy, and stewardship, building a strong sense of community and shared purpose within the team. Research has shown that this approach is associated with higher employee satisfaction, engagement, and long-term organizational health (Eva et al., 2019; Chan & Mak, 2014).

Unlike traditional hierarchical leadership models, Servant Leadership focuses on empowering and uplifting team members, promoting both professional growth and personal well-being. Historically, Servant Leadership emerged from Greenleaf's observations of effective leaders who prioritized

serving others. Over the decades, this approach has gained traction in sectors such as healthcare, education, and non-profits, where its focus on people and community aligns closely with organizational values (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022). Organizations like Southwest Airlines and The Container Store exemplify Servant Leadership by prioritizing employee satisfaction and development, which, in turn, drive customer satisfaction and loyalty (Eva et al., 2018).

Both Agile and Servant Leadership styles offer unique advantages but also present challenges.

Agile Leadership, while highly effective in fast-paced environments, can sometimes lead to team burnout due to its high pace and constant adaptation. The need for rapid decision-making and continuous change can be demanding for team members, potentially causing stress, reduced morale, and increased turnover if not managed effectively (Eva et al., 2019). Furthermore, the focus on flexibility and iterative processes can occasionally compromise the stability and predictability of project outcomes. Recent studies, such as Kaur et al. (2024), suggest that different leadership styles uniquely influence team dynamics and project success. Similarly, Younas et al. (2022) highlight the role of authentic leadership in fostering psychological empowerment, a principle relevant to Agile contexts. On the other hand, Servant Leadership, on the other hand, may encounter challenges in highly competitive environments where rapid decision-making and assertiveness are essential. Its focus on consensus and team well-being may result in slower decision-making processes, which can be a disadvantage in fast-moving industries (Chan & Mak, 2014). Nevertheless, this leadership style's emphasis on employee development and satisfaction contributes to long-term productivity and loyalty. By enhancing team cohesion and resilience, Servant Leadership proves effective in projects that require sustained effort and collaboration (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022).

Case Examples

Agile Leadership has been successfully demonstrated in technology-driven companies such as Spotify and Google, where iterative development and customer feedback are integral to their project management strategies (Rigby, Sutherland, & Noble, 2018). These organizations rely on Agile principles to foster innovation and deliver high-quality products rapidly in dynamic markets. Conversely, Servant Leadership is exemplified by companies like Southwest Airlines and The Container Store. These organizations prioritize employee satisfaction and development, creating a culture that directly translates into high levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Eva et al., 2018).

The choice between Agile and Servant Leadership should be guided by the specific context and requirements of the project. Agile Leadership is particularly suited for dynamic, fast-paced industries where adaptability is key, while Servant Leadership is ideal for organizations prioritizing employee development and long-term sustainability.

Understanding the strengths and limitations of both leadership styles allows project managers to adopt a balanced approach that leverages the best aspects of each philosophy. Future research should focus on empirical studies comparing the effectiveness of Agile and Servant Leadership across various project types and industries. Additionally, exploring the integration of these styles with emerging trends such as hybrid leadership models or digital transformation strategies could provide valuable insights for practitioners (Eva et al., 2019).

Table 1: Comparative summary of agile and servant leadership.

Dimension	Agile Leadership	Servant Leadership
Core Principles	Flexibility, Customer Collaboration	Empathy, Team Well-being
Benefits	Rapid Adaptation, Customer Satisfaction	High Team Satisfaction, Retention
Challenges	Potential Burnout, High Stress Levels	Slower Decision-Making, Not Ideal for Fast-Paced Environments

Source: Own illustration

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to comparing agile leadership and servant leadership in project management. The methodology consists of a comprehensive literature review and quantitative analysis of project outcomes. Both qualitative and quantitative perspectives are essential in social science research (Faizan & Haque, 2015; Faizan & Haque, 2016; Faizan & Haque, 2019; Faizan et al., 2018; Faizan et al., 2019; Gusakov et al., 2020; Haque, 2024). On the other hand, there are traces that quantitative studies help in attaining mathematical objectivity (Haque, 2024; Haq et al., 2024; Haq et al. 2024; Haque & Aston, 2016; Haque et al., 2016; Haque et al., 2018) while qualitative studies are mostly exploring the hidden embedded truth (Haque et al., 2020; Haque, Aydin & Uysal, 2017). Nonetheless, research is more about depth than width (Kaur & Haque, 2024).

Interestingly plethora of research showed that in research, quantitative methods are preferred over qualitative methods (Haque et al., 2017; Haque et al., 2015; Haque, Kot & Imran, 2019; Haque, Nair & Kucukaltan, 2019; Haque, Sher & Urbanski, 2020). In addition to that, some studies have argued that blended approach is to support the stance, in other words, one method is dominant while other is used as secondary support method (Haque & Oino, 2019; Haque & Yamoah, 2014; Imran, Haque & Rebilas, 2018). Often longitudinal design is used to investigate the research phenomenon in two different time intervals (Javed et al., 2018a; Javed et al., 2018b). Nonetheless, cross-sectional design is preferred because of shorter duration (Imran et al., 2018; Imran, Hameed & Haque, 2018). In other words, cross-sectional design is used to extract the data in less than one year while respondents only participate once in the study (Kot et al., 2019a; Kot et al., 2019b; Kot et al., 2020; Ślusarczyk et al., 2019; Ślusarczyk et al., 2020; U-Hameed et al., 2018; Urbański & Haque, 2020; Urbański, Haque & Oino, 2019).

Critical Review of existing literature

The review of literature provides a solid foundation (Baloch et al., 2022; Faizan et al., 2022; Haq & Faizan, 2022). The first phase involves an extensive literature review to gather existing knowledge on agile and servant Leadership. Academic journals, books, and reputable industry publications were reviewed to understand the theoretical foundations, practical applications, and outcomes associated with each leadership style. Sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the understanding of leadership in project management.

Measure Analysis

The second phase involves measuring analysis of project outcomes under agile and servant leadership. Dimensions such as project completion time, budget adherence, team satisfaction, and customer feedback were analyzed to compare the effectiveness of agile and servant leadership.

Project Completion Time

This measures the duration from project initiation to completion. The analysis compares the average completion times for projects led by Agile and Servant leaders.

Budget Adherence

This assesses the financial performance of projects by comparing planned budgets to actual expenditures. The analysis evaluates the variance in budget adherence between the two leadership styles.

Team Satisfaction

This evaluates team members' satisfaction levels through surveys. The analysis examines overall job satisfaction, work-life balance, and team morale under both leadership styles.

Customer Feedback

This measures customer satisfaction and feedback regarding the delivered projects. The analysis compares customer satisfaction scores to determine the perceived value delivered by Agile and Servant-led projects.

Data Triangulation

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, data triangulation was used. The results from the literature review and quantitative analysis were compared and cross-verified. This approach ensures that the conclusions drawn are well-supported by multiple sources of evidence.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. Data collected from secondary sources were cited appropriately, and confidentiality was maintained for any proprietary information used in the analysis. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the institutional review board.

Limitations

While this methodology provides a comprehensive comparison of agile and servant leadership, it has some limitations. The reliance on secondary data may introduce bias and is constrained by the availability and accuracy of organizational data. Future research should consider primary data collection, such as conducting interviews or surveys, and longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of these leadership styles on project outcomes.

4. Findings and Discussions

This section presents the findings from the analysis of project outcomes under Agile and Servant Leadership styles and discusses these results in the context of existing literature.

Project Completion Time

The analysis revealed that projects managed under Agile Leadership generally had shorter completion times compared to those managed under Servant Leadership. Agile methodologies, such as sprints and iterative development, facilitate rapid progress and continuous delivery, contributing to reduced project durations. These findings align with the principles of the Agile Manifesto, which emphasize adaptability and responsiveness to change over rigid planning (Beck et al., 2001).

Budget Adherence

Budget adherence was found to be comparable between Agile and Servant Leadership. Both leadership styles demonstrated strong financial management, with minor deviations in budget that were not statistically significant. This suggests that both styles can effectively control project costs and maintain financial discipline. The literature corroborates this finding, emphasizing that different leadership mechanisms, whether agile or servant, can achieve similar outcomes in terms of budget adherence (Eva et al., 2019).

Team Satisfaction

Team satisfaction scores were higher for projects managed under Servant Leadership. The focus on team well-being, personal growth, and fostering a supportive work environment significantly contributed to greater job satisfaction and lower turnover rates. These findings are consistent with studies highlighting Servant Leadership's positive impact on employee morale and retention (Greenleaf, 2002).

In comparison, Agile Leadership also recorded good team satisfaction levels, but the fast-paced nature of Agile projects occasionally led to elevated stress levels among team members. This aligns with the broader understanding that Agile environments can sometimes pose challenges to team well-being due to their demanding pace (Rigby, Sutherland, & Noble, 2018).

Customer Feedback

Customer feedback was generally more positive for projects managed under Agile Leadership, reflecting its customer-centric approach that emphasizes regular feedback loops and iterative improvements. Agile's prioritization of customer collaboration and delivering valuable products aligns with its observed ability to achieve high customer satisfaction scores (Rigby, Sutherland, & Noble, 2018).

While Servant Leadership also received favorable customer feedback, its benefits were more evident in projects requiring team cohesion and stability, which are essential for maintaining consistent quality over time. This finding suggests that Servant Leadership's strength lies in fostering a stable team environment, indirectly contributing to customer satisfaction.

Discussion - Agile Leadership

The findings highlight Agile Leadership's effectiveness in dynamic, fast-paced environments where flexibility and rapid response to change are essential. Agile's focus on adaptive methodologies, such as iterative development and early delivery, ensures faster project completion and higher customer satisfaction. These strengths make Agile Leadership particularly suitable for industries like technology and software development, rapid iteration and customer feedback drive success.

However, the potential for team burnout under Agile Leadership is a notable challenge. The high pace and continuous demands of Agile projects can lead to stress and fatigue, underscoring the need for strategies to mitigate these effects. Agile leaders should consider rotating responsibilities, scheduling regular breaks, and fostering an open dialogue to address team stress effectively.

These findings align with existing literature, which emphasizes Agile Leadership's ability to foster innovation and deliver customer value while cautioning against its high-pressure nature (Beck et al., 2001; Rigby, Sutherland, & Noble, 2018).

Discussion - Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership demonstrates significant strengths in environments where team cohesion, trust, and long-term sustainability are priorities. Higher team satisfaction and lower turnover rates reflect its emphasis on employee well-being and professional development. This makes Servant Leadership particularly effective in sectors such as healthcare, education, and non-profits, where sustained collaboration and team resilience are critical.

Despite its strengths, Servant Leadership may encounter limitations in competitive and fast-paced environments requiring swift decision-making. The emphasis on team consensus and well-being can sometimes delay decisions, posing challenges in industries where speed is critical (Chan & Mak, 2014).

These findings are consistent with the literature, which underscores Servant Leadership's role in fostering strong organizational culture and team dynamics while acknowledging its slower pace in decision-making (Greenleaf, 2002; Canavesi & Minelli, 2022).

Integrative Insights

The choice between Agile and Servant Leadership should be context-dependent, tailored to the specific requirements of each project. Agile Leadership is advantageous for projects requiring rapid adaptation and customer focus, while Servant Leadership excels in projects emphasizing team development, trust, and long-term sustainability.

Project managers may also explore hybrid leadership models that combine elements of both styles to leverage their complementary strengths. For instance, incorporating Agile practices to maintain flexibility and responsiveness, while adopting a servant leadership approach to enhance team morale and collaboration, could result in a balanced and effective leadership strategy.

Table 2: Key findings summary.

KPI	Agile Leadership	Servant Leadership
Project Completion	Shorter	Longer
Budget Adherence	Similar	Similar
Team Satisfaction	Good but stressful	Higher and sustainable
Customer Feedback	Higher satisfaction	Positive but less emphasized

Source: Own illustration

The findings emphasize the importance of aligning leadership styles with project demands and team needs. Both Agile and Servant Leadership offer valuable tools for project management, but their effectiveness depends on understanding their respective strengths and limitations.

The findings from this study underscore the importance of contextualizing leadership styles to the unique demands of each project. Both Agile and Servant Leadership offer valuable approaches to project management, and their effective application depends on understanding their strengths and limitations. Future research should explore hybrid leadership models that integrate the principles of both styles to optimize project outcomes across diverse environments.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights the unique benefits and challenges associated with Agile and Servant Leadership in project management. Agile leadership is particularly effective in dynamic, fast-paced environments where rapid adaptation and customer focus are critical. It excels in delivering quick project completions and high customer satisfaction. However, it also carries the risk of team burnout if not carefully managed. In contrast, Servant Leadership fosters a supportive and cohesive team environment, resulting in higher employee satisfaction and retention. This style is especially advantageous in sectors requiring sustained effort and collaboration, though it may slow decision-making in more competitive or time-sensitive settings.

Project managers should choose a leadership style that aligns with the specific needs of their projects, carefully weighing the strengths and limitations of each approach.

The following are the recommendations:

Hybrid Leadership Models: Future research should focus on exploring hybrid leadership models that combine the strengths of both Agile and Servant Leadership. This could lead to more adaptable and sustainable leadership strategies that balance the need for flexibility with the importance of team well-being.

Stress Management Strategies in Agile: Given the potential for burnout under Agile leadership, project managers should implement strategies such as task rotation, clear goal-setting, and regular feedback loops to mitigate stress and sustain team morale.

Empathy in Decision-Making: For projects led by Servant Leadership, emphasizing both empathy and decisiveness could enhance decision-making speed while maintaining a supportive environment, especially in competitive industries.

Industry-Specific Leadership Training: Providing leadership development programs tailored to different industries could help project managers better understand when to apply each leadership style. For example, industries that prioritize customer feedback and rapid adaptation may benefit more from Agile leadership, while sectors with a focus on employee well-being might align better with Servant Leadership.

Longitudinal Studies: Future research should consider longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of both leadership styles on team dynamics, project outcomes, and organizational success. This would provide deeper insights into how leadership influences project sustainability over time.

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