

# The Need for Servant Leadership in Organizations: A Study on Afghan-Americans

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## Abstract

Cultures tend to influence the behavior of individuals due to years of socialization and globalization. This research surveyed the responses of 600 Afghan-Americans to better understand their orientation toward servant leadership based on gender, age, and place of birth. The respondents had high scores for servant leadership orientation and there was a statistically significant difference between the scores of male and female respondents. Younger respondents had a significantly higher tendency toward a servant leadership orientation than their older counterparts. Finally, those who were born in Afghanistan had a higher servant leadership score than respondents who were born in the United States. Suggestions, implications, and future research avenues are presented.

**Keywords** : Afghans, Afghanistan, Gender, Servant Leadership, Culture and Socialization.

## 1. Introduction

Today's competitive organizations demand servant leadership. In an organization, leaders must believe in change, innovate continuously, recognize the need for transparency, and stress the importance of unity and collaboration. "In highly competitive, rapidly changing environments, caring and appreciative leaders are the ones to bet on for long-term success" (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 78). The 21st century leader must be equipped with the right tools to be effective, empathic, and efficient in all aspects of the workplace. A study by Mujtaba and Kaifi (2009) illuminated how Afghan leaders have higher scores on the relationship orientation which relates to higher levels of emotional intelligence and better job performance.

Afghanistan has a high-context and collective culture where individuals continuously work together to accomplish all goals. For example in Afghanistan, "The schools generally requested help from students' fathers for renovations and improvements to classrooms and schools, which accorded with traditional gender roles and expertise" (Hoodfar, 2007, p. 280). Throughout history, Afghans have been exposed to many diverse cultures and have acquired many new values while holding on to the threads of their own culture. This research seeks to understand whether or not there is a difference between those who were born in

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Afghanistan in regards to their servant leadership orientation compared to those who were born abroad as second-generation Afghans.

## 2. Servant Leadership

Some people are more naturally endowed for leadership than others. Most people can be developed into strong leaders. Servant leadership emphasizes that leaders should be attentive to the concerns of their followers and empathize with them; they should take care of them and nurture them (Northouse, 2004, p. 309). A servant leader leads by pure example. As Lao-Tzu (Father of Taoism) expressed, the key qualities that great leaders possess are selflessness, unbiased leadership, acting as a midwife, and being like water (Wren, 1995, p. 70). In selflessness, the wise leader is not egocentric, which equates to being more understanding and open-minded. Unbiased leadership means treating everyone equally without having preconceived notions. By being a midwife, leaders do not intervene in all organizational affairs and instead allow employees to resolve issues on their own. A leader is like water because a leader cleanses, purifies, and refreshes an organization's climate.

Being able to deliver a warm style of leadership and paying attention to everyone are key elements of gaining the trust and respect of employees. The importance of paying attention is to show people that you care, and the best way to do this is to pay attention to what they're doing, how they're feeling, who they are, and what they like and dislike.

"Paying attention demands that you put others first" (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 79). One should not think of paying attention as "patrolling" or "inspecting" but rather being there by supporting, coaching, and directing employees. Leadership is "an alternative style of management aimed not at control but rather at assisting individuals in discovering and pursuing their own developmental needs" (Denhardt, 1993, p. 204).

If employees acknowledge a person as a caring and supportive leader, he or she will gain their trust, respect, and friendship. While leadership is easy to explain, it is not so easy to practice. Leadership is about behavior first and skills second. It all comes back to promoting positive expectations and having these expectations realized. It is important for a leader to know his or her own strengths as a "carpenter knows his tools" (Rath & Conchie, 2009, p. 13).

Servant leaders are always complimenting and motivating employees and recognizing their achievements. From this outgoing and friendly behavior, it is easy for employees to open up and communicate how they feel about every aspect of the organization. Servant leaders will respect everyone's opinion, even if someone challenges an organizational policy. "Learning to understand and see things from another's perspective is absolutely crucial to building trusting relations and to career success" (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 79). Servant leaders treat people as they would like to be treated. "You express joy in seeing others succeed, you cheer others along, and you offer supportive coaching, rather than being a militant authority figure who is out patrolling the neighborhood" (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 77).

Servant leaders are followed because people trust and respect them, rather than the skills they possess. Leadership is both similar and different from management. Management relies more on planning, organizing, and controlling outcomes. Leadership relies on some management skills too, but more so on qualities such as integrity, honesty, humility, courage, commitment, sincerity, passion, confidence, wisdom, determination, compassion, and sensitivity. Most people don't seek to be leaders. Those who want to be a leader can develop leadership ability. It is important to understand that "as you take the role of a caring leader; people soon begin relating to you differently" (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 77). A strong leader must be able to listen, consult, involve, and explain why and how things should be done.

Leadership in the workplace is about having vision and being able to transform that vision into action by influencing others to complete relevant tasks in a timely manner while maintaining healthy relationships with colleagues, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders. According to Jago (1982), "Leadership is expressed or displayed through interaction between people and necessarily implies its complement, followership. For one to influence, another must permit himself to be influenced" (p. 316).

## 3. Afghanistan and the Afghans

Afghanistan, a country with a history that is both bitter and sweet, has become the center of attention throughout the world. Afghanistan's strategic location has enticed invaders to conquer the country time after time, and yet none have ever been successful in the long-term. "Uniquely among the nations of Eurasia, Afghanistan has steadfastly resisted conquest, despite being a crossroads for ambitious empires throughout ancient and medieval times and a battleground in the modern age during the Great Game and Cold War" (Tanner, 2009, p. 26). The past three decades of continuous war has left the country with a frail social, economical, and political infrastructure that is in desperate need of assistance.

In the mid-20th century, Afghans began migrating to Europe and the U.S. for educational and professional purposes. The first wave of Afghan refugees arrived in the United States shortly after the former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 which resulted in a 10-year war with millions of casualties. As a result, most Afghans have spent at least two decades in America. Afghans have successfully built networks, opened up restaurants, and other small businesses. With the emergence of a generation of Afghan children raised and educated in the United States, the Afghan community has proven to be a dynamic force with high-standards and goals. Afghans are focused on becoming successful by obtaining advanced degrees and integrating into the Western culture while keeping their own traditions.

The first-generation Afghans who have grown up in United States are successful in pursuing their educational and entrepreneurial dreams in various industries. Afghan leaders from all professions have started emerging. "There are currently many Afghan-American medical doctors, engineers, attorneys, professors, police officers, and many who work in either the private or public sectors of the workforce" (Kaifi, 2009, p.10). Many Afghans have also proven to be strong leaders in their

professions.

The three research hypotheses for this study are as follows:

- **Hypothesis1** – Male and female Afghans will have similar servant leadership scores.
- **Hypothesis2** - Afghan respondents who are 26 years of age and older will have higher servant leadership scores than Afghan respondents who are 25 years of age and younger.
- **Hypothesis3** – Afghan-American respondents who were born in the United States will have similar servant leadership scores as respondents who were born in Afghanistan.

#### 4. Research Methodology

Afghan-Americans who participated in this study completed a modified MLQ 5X-Short (Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire) survey that was originally developed by Bass and Avolio (1995) for leadership studies. The survey instrument used for this study had ten short questions (Appendix A) designed for the population. Many leadership researchers (Pounder, 2008; Kearney, 2008; Ling et al., 2008; and Jansen et al., 2008) have used similar instruments to study the leadership styles of various participants. For example, Pounder used a modified version of the MLQ Form 5X-Short which “involved a sample of instructors and undergraduate students in a Hong Kong university business school” (2008, p. 2). Pounder used a version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire that was modified for a classroom situation to better understand the styles of prospective leaders.

The questions are set up in a Likert scale format where a response of 1 means “Never” and a response of 5 means the element is “Always” a characteristic of the responder. The respondent would rate him/herself from a scale of 1 to 5 in regard to how many words he or she might be using to actually express his/her views regarding what the team can and must do. The higher the overall mean scores for the elements, the more likely that he or she is likely to have a stronger orientation toward a servant leadership style. One’s range for being a servant leader can be expressed with a score of “Very low” to a score of “Very high” as presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Servant Leadership Orientation Range	
45-50	Very high range
40-44	High range
35-39	Moderately high range
30-34	Moderately low range
25-29	Low range
10-24	Very low range

The survey instrument was distributed to 700 Afghan-Americans who all attend the same Islamic Center in Concord, California. A total of 606 surveys were returned. Of the 606 surveys returned, six were eliminated due to the fact that all questions were marked high or low. A total of 600 (which represents a 85% response rate) surveys were completed successfully by Afghans who live throughout the United States.

The research questions focused on the extent to which Afghans are servant leaders based upon their mean survey scores. For this

survey, the higher the overall sum of the scores, the more likely that the participant is more oriented toward a servant leadership style.

#### 5. Results and Analysis

The responses of 600 Afghan-Americans demonstrate that their mean servant leadership is 41.266 with a standard deviation of 4.26. These responses fall in the high range for having a servant leadership orientation.

The first hypothesis predicted that “Male and female Afghans will have similar servant leadership scores” and, as presented in Table 2, this study could not support this supposition since male scores fall in the high range which are significantly higher than their female counterparts.

Table 2

Servant Leadership Score by Gender Descriptive Statistics and T-test of Two Means			
Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sample Size
Males	44.7933	2.18689	300
Females	37.74	2.56049	300

t = 25.64; p = 0.001

The second hypothesis predicted that “Afghan respondents who are 26 years of age and older will have higher servant leadership scores than Afghan respondents who are 25 years of age and younger” and, as presented in Table 3, this study could not support this supposition since younger respondents’ scores fall in the high range which are significantly higher than the older respondents.

Table 3

Servant Leadership Score by Age Descriptive Statistics and T-test of Two Means			
Age	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sample Size
Younger	42.048	4.15	500
Older	37.36	2.097	100

t = 8.03; p = 0.001

The last hypothesis predicted that “Afghan-American respondents who were born in the United States will have similar servant leadership scores as respondents who were born in Afghanistan” and, as presented in Table 4, this study could not support this supposition since the respondents who were born in Afghanistan had a significantly higher score than the respondents who were born in the United States.

Table 4

Servant Leadership Score by Place of Birth Descriptive Statistics and T-test of Two Means			
Place of Birth	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sample Size
Afghanistan	44.1	2.36	180
United States	40.0524	4.316	420

t = 8.37; p = 0.001

This study has demonstrated that Afghan-American respondents scored in the high range for having a servant leadership orientation. Furthermore, there was a statistically significant difference between the scores of male and female respondents with males having a higher tendency toward servant leadership. Younger respondents had a significantly higher tendency toward a servant leadership orientation than their older counterparts. Finally, this study showed that those who were born in Afghanistan have a higher servant leadership orientation than Afghan-American respondents who were born in the United States.

## 6. Implications and Limitations

Afghans seem to be naturally oriented toward servant leadership perhaps due to the fact that they have a higher need for such empathetic leaders. Or perhaps Afghans ideologically tend to lean toward servant leadership because they are focused on more relationships with their colleagues, peers, and customers. A research study by Mujtaba and Kaifi (2009) explained that:

Afghan respondents from a high-context culture of Afghanistan are more relationship-orientated. Interestingly, their task orientation score is also in the moderately high range. Therefore, managers and supervisors should feel comfortable in knowing that Afghan employees will complete the task at hand in a timely manner while maintaining a healthy relationship with their colleagues, peers, customers, and superiors. (p. 120)

The Afghan culture places a considerable emphasis on respecting others. According to Ewans (2002), "They [Afghans] will carry hospitality to embarrassing extremes, but are implacable enemies" (p. 9). This research has shown that young Afghan respondents are even more inclined to be servant leaders than their older counterparts. In the 21st century, Afghans can actually be the most promising applicants when recruiting for management positions because of their servant leadership capabilities such as having a strategic vision, leading by example, and practicing high ethical standards.

There are some limitations to this study and one is the modified MLQ 5X-Short (Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire) survey used for this research. This short survey can be combined with other more comprehensive instruments to enhance and confirm the results. Future studies can duplicate the research with a greater number of Afghan participants that are compared to other ethnicities. Future studies might control this variable by expanding the research population to include respondents from Wardak, Ghazni, Pinjshir, Laghman, and other provinces within Afghanistan. Finally, future researchers should consider translating the survey instrument into Persian and Pashto languages so as to facilitate the test subjects' preferred and dominant reading skills.

## 7. Conclusion

This study focused on the Afghan-American population to better understand their tendencies toward servant leadership. The results demonstrated that the respondents scored in the high range of servant leadership orientation. Male and younger

respondents along with those who were actually born in Afghanistan had a higher tendency toward servant leadership than their counterparts. Afghans have servant leadership tendencies which are sought by many organizations today because "subordinates view the style positively in terms of effectiveness, satisfaction, and motivation to expend effort" (Pounder, 2008, p. 4).

The modern workplace for a multinational firm can be very diverse as the workforce today is filled with people from many different leadership styles. As such, "public administrators must be managers of diverse interests" and "this necessity grows out of the relativity of values and the pluralization of society" (Cooper, 1998, p. 51). It is for certain that Afghan-Americans bring diverse views and perspectives with an orientation toward servant leadership into the workplace which can help make them ethical and respected leaders within their teams, departments, organizations, and communities.

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Appendix A

Servant Leadership Survey

Questions	Never.....Always
1. I believe that integrity is important.	1 2 3 4 5
2. I am empathetic.	1 2 3 4 5
3. I help others find meaning in their work.	1 2 3 4 5
4. I believe that accountability is important.	1 2 3 4 5
5. I analyze situations from different perspectives.	1 2 3 4 5
6. I get others to rethink ideas that they had never questioned before.	1 2 3 4 5
7. I make others feel good to be around me.	1 2 3 4 5
8. I like to listen to my peers.	1 2 3 4 5
9. I like to empower others.	1 2 3 4 5
10. Others have complete faith in me.	1 2 3 4 5
<b>Total Score:</b>	