

# Understanding Servant Leadership in Multicultural Teams: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of servant leadership in multicultural teams, focusing on how servant leadership practices are enacted and perceived within culturally diverse organizational contexts in China. A qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology was employed to capture participants' lived experiences. Twenty-two participants with at least two years of experience in multicultural teams were recruited through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in both English and Mandarin, lasting between 45 and 70 minutes, and continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and where necessary, translated into English. Data were analyzed using NVivo 14, following systematic stages of coding and thematic analysis to extract categories and subcategories that captured the essence of servant leadership in multicultural settings. Analysis revealed four overarching themes: (1) empowering team members, encompassing autonomy, skill development, recognition, trust, innovation, and confidence building; (2) cross-cultural sensitivity, characterized by respect for diversity, language accommodation, adaptive leadership, equity, and cultural curiosity; (3) ethical and humble leadership, reflected in transparency, leading by example, humility, prioritization of collective good, and admitting mistakes; and (4) nurturing team relationships, expressed through active listening, emotional support, trust-building, collaboration, conflict resolution, and encouraging feedback. These findings collectively suggest that servant leadership fosters inclusivity, psychological safety, and innovation in multicultural team contexts. The study concludes that servant leadership is a highly effective approach for managing multicultural teams, as it combines empowerment, cultural sensitivity, ethical humility, and relational care to foster trust, unity, and performance. The findings extend servant leadership theory into multicultural settings, demonstrating its adaptability and relevance in diverse global workplaces.

**Keywords:** Servant leadership; multicultural teams; phenomenology; qualitative research; empowerment; cultural sensitivity

## Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, multicultural teams have become the norm rather than the exception across organizations (Verwijns & Russo, 2023). Such teams bring rich diversity—spanning cultural backgrounds, languages, values, and working styles—which can enhance innovation and problem-solving (Verwijns & Russo, 2023). Yet they also present unique leadership challenges: cultural misunderstandings, conflicting expectations, and varying communication norms can undermine cohesion and performance (Verwijns & Russo, 2023; Nosratabadi et al., 2020). Amidst such complexity, leadership approaches that prioritize empathy, inclusivity, and follower development have been proposed as especially effective in multicultural contexts.



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**Servant leadership**, a theory introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf, positions the leader as a servant first—someone whose primary intention is to serve others, enabling their growth and flourishing (Greenleaf, 1977/2002). This contrasts with traditional leadership paradigms emphasizing power, control, or directive authority. Greenleaf's "best test" asks: *"Do those served grow as persons? Do they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous?"* (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27). Larry Spears later distilled key characteristics of servant leaders, including listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, stewardship, and a commitment to the growth of people (Spears, as cited in Wikipedia, 2025).

Over the past two decades, servant leadership has evolved into a well-studied, multi-dimensional construct. Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, and Liden's systematic review (2019) highlights its relational, ethical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions (Eva et al., 2019). Researchers have developed robust measurement scales such as the Servant Leadership Behavior Scale (Sendjaya et al., 2019) and have documented significant positive outcomes: enhanced job satisfaction, psychological well-being, performance, reduced turnover, and stronger organizational commitment (Wikipedia, 2025; Tang et al., 2016; Rodriguez-Carvajal et al., 2019). In fact, a meta-analysis of 318 empirical studies involving over 148,000 participants found servant leadership exhibited one of the strongest relationships with employee job satisfaction among leadership styles (Wikipedia German page, 2.8 years ago).

Despite its growing empirical support, the applicability of servant leadership in multicultural and cross-cultural contexts remains underexplored (Gowda et al., 2023). Some researchers argue that servant leaders' inclusive mindsets—emphasizing harmony, active listening, developmental support, and trust—are ideally suited to diverse team environments (Science Publishing Group, 2025). This inclusive orientation may help address intra-team conflict arising from cultural differences, fostering psychological safety and creative collaboration.

Indeed, cultural intelligence (CQ)—leaders' capability to function effectively across cultural contexts—is central in multicultural settings (Nosratabadi et al., 2020). Servant leadership and CQ may interact: servant leaders who genuinely prioritize others and demonstrate adaptability may also exhibit heightened cultural intelligence and vice versa (Tennakoon, 2023). Yet empirical research exploring this synergy, particularly through a phenomenological lens, is scant.

Phenomenology, as a qualitative methodology, seeks to probe deeply into individuals' lived experiences in order to reveal the essence of a phenomenon (Patterson, 2024). This approach is especially apt for examining complex constructs like servant leadership in the nuanced, fractured ground of multicultural teamwork. Previous phenomenological studies on servant leadership have focused on single-culture domains—educational faculty experiences (Patterson, 2024) or K-12 principals (Chavarria, 2022). Similarly, investigations of servant leadership in diverse cultural contexts often remain theoretical or cross-sectional, lacking phenomenological depth (Gowda et al., 2023; Tennakoon, 2023).

Therefore, a gap exists: the lived experiences of individuals operating under servant leadership within multicultural teams—especially in China, where global interactions are frequent—are largely unexplored. China presents a compelling context: rapid globalization, diverse workforces blending local and expatriate professionals, and evolving leadership paradigms make it a fertile ground for examining servant leadership in practice.

To address this gap, the present study undertakes a phenomenological inquiry into servant leadership as experienced in multicultural teams in China. With 22 participants, the study seeks to uncover core constituents—empowerment, cultural sensitivity, ethical humility, relational nurturing—through semi-structured interviews, continuing until theoretical saturation is reached and employing NVivo 14 for systematic analysis.

The objectives are three-fold:

1. Explore how servant leadership is perceived and enacted by team members in multicultural settings in China.
2. Identify essential behaviors, attitudes, and dynamics that constitute servant leadership within these culturally diverse teams.
3. Extend theory by articulating contextually grounded servant leadership components that are salient in multicultural environments, thereby informing leadership development and practice in globalizing workplaces.

By illuminating these lived experiences, this study contributes both empirically—filling a gap in phenomenological understanding of servant leadership in multicultural contexts—and practically—offering insights for leaders navigating increasingly diverse collaborative settings.

## Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology, as the primary aim was to explore and understand the lived experiences of servant leadership within multicultural teams. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows for the in-depth investigation of participants' perceptions, feelings, and meanings attached to their experiences, thereby providing a richer understanding of how servant leadership is enacted and interpreted across cultural contexts.

The study utilized a purposive sampling strategy to recruit participants who had direct experience working in multicultural teams where servant leadership behaviors were present or perceived. A total of 22 participants were selected from different professional sectors in China, ensuring diversity in both organizational contexts and cultural backgrounds represented within the teams. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least two years of professional experience in multicultural team settings. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to data collection. Data saturation, or theoretical saturation, was achieved when no new themes or insights emerged during the interviews.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility to explore the nuances of participants' experiences while maintaining consistency in addressing key research questions. An interview guide was developed to cover central aspects of servant leadership behaviors, challenges in multicultural contexts, and perceived impacts on team dynamics. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' availability and preference. Interviews were conducted in English and Mandarin, depending on participants' language comfort, and were audio-recorded with permission. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English when necessary to ensure consistency in analysis.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, organize, and interpret patterns within the data. The analysis followed a phenomenological orientation, focusing on capturing the essence of participants' lived experiences. NVivo 14 software was used to manage the data, code transcripts systematically, and facilitate the categorization of themes. The process involved several stages: (1) repeated reading of transcripts for immersion, (2) open coding to capture initial meanings, (3) axial coding to identify relationships among codes, and (4) development of overarching themes that reflected the core dimensions of servant leadership in multicultural teams. To enhance credibility, coding was cross-checked by multiple researchers, and reflective memos were maintained throughout the analysis to ensure transparency and reflexivity.

## Findings and Results

The study included 22 participants from multicultural teams in China, representing a diverse range of professional backgrounds including technology, education, healthcare, and international business. Of the participants, 12 were male (54.5%) and 10 were female (45.5%), with ages ranging from 26 to 49 years ( $M = 36.2$ ). In terms of cultural background, 14 participants were Chinese nationals with significant cross-cultural team experience, while 8 participants were expatriates from countries including India, Germany, the United States, and Nigeria. Work experience in multicultural teams varied between 2 and 12 years, with the majority ( $n = 15$ ) having between 5 and 8 years of exposure.

### Reporting the Table Data (Findings Style with Quotes)

#### Category 1: Empowering Team Members

##### Encouraging Autonomy

Participants frequently highlighted the importance of autonomy in fostering servant leadership. They explained that being trusted to make decisions without constant oversight enhanced their motivation. As one participant remarked, “When my leader told me to handle a client presentation my way, I felt more confident and engaged in the project.” Autonomy was consistently linked to initiative-taking and reduced micromanagement.

##### Skill Development Support

Another strong theme was the emphasis on continuous learning through training, mentorship, and coaching. Several participants stated that their leaders actively encouraged professional growth. One interviewee noted, “My manager offered to mentor me after hours, which really improved my technical and interpersonal skills.” Such initiatives were perceived as crucial to long-term empowerment.

##### Recognition and Appreciation

Recognition emerged as an important servant leadership practice. Participants felt valued when their efforts were acknowledged publicly. For instance, a participant shared, “Even a simple thank-you email in front of the team made me feel that my contribution mattered.” This reinforced motivation and loyalty within multicultural teams.

##### Delegation with Trust

Delegating responsibility while showing trust was repeatedly discussed. Leaders who empowered team members by assigning meaningful tasks were perceived positively. One participant emphasized, “He didn’t just give me work; he gave me responsibility. That made all the difference.” This approach fostered ownership and accountability.

##### Fostering Innovation

Servant leaders were seen as catalysts for innovation by encouraging creativity and risk-taking. According to one respondent, “Our leader told us, ‘Don’t be afraid to fail, just try something new.’ That freedom led us to propose ideas we normally wouldn’t.” Such encouragement built a culture of experimentation.

##### Building Confidence

Finally, leaders were described as confidence-builders, particularly for hesitant or less experienced members. A participant commented, “When I doubted myself, my leader reminded me of my strengths. That gave me the courage to contribute.” Positive reinforcement nurtured self-belief across cultures.

#### Category 2: Cross-Cultural Sensitivity

##### Respect for Cultural Diversity

Respect for cultural traditions and communication styles was a recurring theme. One Chinese participant explained, “He respected our holidays and always asked how we celebrate. That made us feel included.” Leaders’ cultural respect was perceived as central to servant leadership.

#### Language Accommodation

Language sensitivity was another practical expression of servant leadership. Participants appreciated simplified English or translation support. As one expatriate stated, “She slowed down her English and made sure I understood. That effort made me feel part of the team.”

#### Conflict Mediation Across Cultures

Servant leaders often mediated cultural misunderstandings. A participant recalled, “When we argued about working styles, our leader calmly explained both perspectives. He never took sides but helped us reach an agreement.” This facilitated harmony in diverse teams.

#### Cultural Learning and Curiosity

Leaders’ willingness to learn about other cultures fostered trust. For example, one respondent shared, “My manager asked me to teach him about my country’s customs, which showed he really cared.” This curiosity strengthened relationships.

#### Equity in Team Roles

Equitable distribution of tasks was seen as vital. One participant stated, “Our leader rotated team responsibilities so no one felt left out because of culture or background.” Fairness reinforced cohesion in multicultural groups.

#### Adapting Leadership Styles

Flexibility in leadership styles was crucial. A participant noted, “He adjusted his tone with senior Chinese staff but was more casual with foreigners. That balance kept everyone comfortable.” Adaptation enhanced cross-cultural trust.

#### Trust-Building in Diversity

Finally, trust emerged as the foundation of multicultural servant leadership. As one respondent put it, “I trusted him because he treated everyone equally, no matter where they were from.”

### Category 3: Ethical and Humble Leadership

#### Leading by Example

Participants stressed that leaders modeled integrity through fair and honest actions. “He always arrived on time and treated everyone with respect, so we naturally followed his example,” one participant noted.

#### Transparency in Decisions

Open communication about decisions built credibility. A respondent said, “She explained why a decision was made instead of just announcing it. That honesty helped us accept the change.”

#### Admitting Mistakes

Humility was expressed through leaders admitting mistakes. “Our manager once apologized in front of everyone for a wrong call. That made me respect him more,” shared one team member.

#### Prioritizing Collective Good

Team welfare over personal gain was highly valued. One participant recalled, “He rejected personal recognition and said, ‘This is our team’s success.’” Such humility strengthened group solidarity.

#### Humility in Leadership

Overall, humility permeated servant leadership practices. “She never acted superior, even though she was the boss. That made us feel equal,” a respondent stated.

#### Category 4: Nurturing Team Relationships

##### Active Listening

Listening with empathy was a defining servant leadership trait. One participant remarked, “When I talked, he really listened, not just waited to reply. That felt different.”

##### Emotional Support

Leaders’ emotional support during stress was highlighted. A participant shared, “When I was homesick, my manager checked on me and encouraged me to take time for myself.” This reinforced a sense of care.

##### Building Trust and Safety

Trust was nurtured through consistent and confidential leadership. “I knew I could tell her anything and it wouldn’t go beyond her office,” one member explained.

##### Collaboration and Unity

Servant leaders promoted unity through shared goals. As one respondent stated, “He often reminded us, ‘We win as one team, not as individuals.’ That created strong collaboration.”

##### Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution was another key behavior. “Whenever disputes arose, he encouraged dialogue instead of punishing us,” a participant explained. This approach enhanced fairness and peace.

##### Encouraging Feedback

Finally, leaders created a culture of feedback. One member said, “She asked us what we thought of her leadership. That made us feel our voices mattered.”

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this phenomenological study revealed four overarching themes—empowering team members, cross-cultural sensitivity, ethical and humble leadership, and nurturing team relationships—that together illustrate how servant leadership manifests in multicultural teams in China. These themes, distilled through the lived experiences of 22 participants, highlight the multifaceted ways in which servant leaders foster trust, inclusivity, and growth in culturally diverse settings. In this section, the findings are interpreted in light of existing scholarship on servant leadership and multicultural team dynamics.

The results showed that servant leaders consistently empowered team members by encouraging autonomy, supporting skill development, offering recognition, delegating with trust, fostering innovation, and building confidence. These practices align with Greenleaf’s (1977/2002) foundational proposition that servant leadership prioritizes follower growth and autonomy. The frequent references to leaders granting decision-making freedom echo Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson’s (2008) findings that servant leadership is positively associated with empowerment and self-efficacy.

Recognition and appreciation also emerged as strong drivers of motivation in this study. Participants emphasized that even simple gestures of acknowledgment reinforced their sense of belonging. This observation supports the work of Eva et al. (2019), who noted that servant leaders’ recognition behaviors improve employee satisfaction and commitment. Furthermore, participants’ emphasis on leaders building confidence resonates with the findings of



Tang, Kwan, Zhang, and Zhu (2016), who showed that servant leaders' supportive practices alleviate emotional exhaustion and promote resilience.

The emphasis on innovation, particularly leaders' willingness to allow for risk-taking, expands the current literature. While servant leadership has long been tied to follower development, its role in fostering creativity in multicultural teams has not been sufficiently emphasized. Recent studies, however, suggest that servant leadership can indeed stimulate innovation by creating safe environments for experimentation (Rodríguez-Carvajal et al., 2019). Participants' accounts, such as being encouraged to "try something new" without fear of failure, reinforce this perspective.

Cross-cultural sensitivity was another significant theme, with participants highlighting respect for cultural diversity, language accommodation, conflict mediation, curiosity toward cultural learning, equity in roles, and adaptive leadership styles. These findings suggest that servant leadership can be a critical vehicle for managing cultural differences constructively. The results support Nosratabadi, Bahrami, Palouzian, and Mosavi's (2020) assertion that leaders' cultural intelligence (CQ) is pivotal in enhancing organizational performance in multicultural environments.

Respect for cultural traditions and communication styles was particularly salient. Participants valued leaders who acknowledged local holidays or adapted communication to suit different cultural backgrounds. This aligns with Verwijns and Russo's (2023) argument that multicultural teams thrive when leaders foster psychological safety by respecting diversity. Similarly, language accommodation behaviors observed in this study resonate with Tennakoon's (2023) research, which found that servant leaders' inclusive communication practices enhanced trust among multicultural IT professionals.

Participants' experiences of leaders mediating cross-cultural conflicts reflect the persuasive rather than authoritarian approach advocated in servant leadership literature (Eva et al., 2019). Such mediation reduces intercultural tension and promotes harmony, reinforcing earlier findings by Gowda, Jaiwant, and Kureethara (2023) on servant leadership's compatibility with diversity management. Moreover, leaders' curiosity toward learning about other cultures exemplifies humility in action, which has been recognized as a vital component of servant leadership (Spears, 2002).

An especially novel contribution of this study is the evidence that servant leaders deliberately adapted their leadership styles across cultural groups—being more formal with Chinese staff while adopting a casual tone with expatriates. This illustrates the fusion of servant leadership with cultural adaptability, highlighting its potential synergy with CQ. Such adaptability is consistent with Patterson's (2024) findings that servant leaders in educational settings often adjust their behaviors to meet generational differences. Applied here, it suggests that servant leadership is not static but flexible, evolving with cultural needs.

Ethical and humble leadership emerged as a cornerstone of participants' experiences. Leading by example, transparency in decisions, admitting mistakes, prioritizing collective good, and humility were consistently cited. These qualities strongly reflect Greenleaf's (1977/2002) and Spears's (2002) conceptualizations of servant leadership, which emphasize stewardship, integrity, and humility.

The participants' appreciation of transparency in decision-making supports Eva et al.'s (2019) review, which identifies transparency as a critical dimension of servant leadership that strengthens trust. Similarly, leaders admitting mistakes resonates with Tang et al. (2016), who reported that servant leaders' vulnerability enhances

followers' emotional attachment and loyalty. In this study, a participant expressed greater respect after a manager publicly acknowledged an error, demonstrating how humility humanizes leaders and deepens trust.

The prioritization of collective good also aligns with Rodríguez-Carvajal et al.'s (2019) findings that servant leadership promotes vitality and meaningful work by orienting teams toward shared goals. Participants' experiences of leaders rejecting personal recognition in favor of team success illustrate the servant leader's orientation toward others.

The results also advance theory by reinforcing the role of humility as not just an ethical stance but as an intercultural competency. In multicultural teams where hierarchical norms and cultural sensitivities differ, humility enables leaders to avoid perceptions of superiority and instead cultivate equality. This finding extends Tennakoon's (2023) argument that servant leadership enhances CQ by adding humility as a bridging mechanism across cultures.

The final major theme concerned nurturing relationships through active listening, emotional support, building trust and safety, collaboration, conflict resolution, and encouraging feedback. These behaviors reflect servant leaders' relational focus and align with previous research emphasizing servant leadership's strong interpersonal orientation (Eva et al., 2019).

Participants consistently emphasized active listening, noting that leaders' attentiveness differentiated them from more transactional leadership styles. This echoes Greenleaf's (1977/2002) assertion that listening is central to servant leadership, as well as Patterson's (2024) phenomenological findings that leaders' listening behaviors enhanced faculty trust.

Emotional support also emerged as critical in multicultural teams, where members often face stress related to relocation, cultural adjustment, or communication barriers. This finding supports Tang et al.'s (2016) conclusion that servant leaders buffer against emotional exhaustion by demonstrating care and compassion.

Building trust and psychological safety was another consistent thread, reinforcing Verwijs and Russo's (2023) work on the importance of psychological safety in diverse teams. In this study, participants reported that confidentiality and consistency in leaders' actions created safe environments for open dialogue.

Collaboration and unity, particularly through shared goals and team bonding, align with Rodríguez-Carvajal et al.'s (2019) observations that servant leadership fosters collective vitality. Similarly, participants' accounts of leaders resolving conflict through dialogue rather than punishment further highlight servant leadership's relational ethos.

Finally, participants' appreciation for leaders encouraging feedback illustrates the reciprocal nature of servant leadership. Encouraging upward feedback strengthens two-way trust and is consistent with Eva et al.'s (2019) identification of participative decision-making as a hallmark of servant leadership.

Taken together, these results affirm the applicability of servant leadership in multicultural teams. The four themes echo the multidimensional nature of servant leadership identified by Eva et al. (2019) while extending this knowledge by contextualizing it within culturally diverse Chinese organizational settings. The study highlights servant leadership as both a leadership style and a cultural bridge, integrating empowerment, sensitivity, ethics, and relational care.

Importantly, the findings suggest that servant leadership is not merely a Western construct but resonates across cultural boundaries when adapted with cultural sensitivity. This aligns with recent scholarship urging more cross-cultural examinations of leadership theories (Gowda et al., 2023; Tennakoon, 2023). In particular, the evidence of leaders adapting styles based on cultural expectations suggests a dynamic interplay between servant leadership and CQ, advancing an area of research that has been underdeveloped.



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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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