

## Servant Leadership in Academic Advising

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### Abstract

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In our time, the leadership approaches have changed with the rapid changes taking place in the world. Nowadays, it is generally accepted that serving others is a leader's priority. Academic advisors, who can be classified as leaders in the advisor-advisee relationship, are also expected that they should exhibit a developmental academic advisor behavior towards their students. Especially, at the doctoral level, the servant leadership behavior of the advisor has the effect of a role model behavior on the advisee and in the end it is predicted that this would make a valuable contribution to society. The purpose of the study is to investigate academic advising relationship at the graduate level in higher education. A model is proposed that involves the servant leadership behavior of the academic advisors and its effects on the advisees which in turn contributes to the objectives of the graduate level study and welfare of the society.

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**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Academic Advising, Developmental Advising, Graduate Studies

### Introduction

Leadership process is defined as a process that an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2004). Back in 1960's Douglas McGregor identified basically two types of leadership in his Theory X - Theory Y which includes authoritative leadership at one end and supportive and developmental leadership at the other end. In 21st century, organizations' traditional vertical relations and the accompanying parental approach are far from providing the interaction, discussion, compromise and the collective solutions to the problems encountered (Porter-O'Grady, 2003).

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Persuasion, motivation, appreciation, empathy and compromise have become more important in this relationship (Jooste, 2004). Nowadays, servant leadership, a new leadership approach outside formal authority structure with a focus on building up a creative learning environment and developing people is becoming popular.

Servant leadership focuses on meeting the needs of the organization. Servant leaders who can be classified as the developmental leaders in the leadership continuum develop their colleagues, coach and mentor them and unleash their energy and intelligence (Keith, 2009).

Academic advisors also should function as leaders in education in order to develop their students. The advisor-advisee interaction is similar to the interaction between the servant leader-follower interaction and the role of the advisor is to assist the student in integrating academic learning with professional and personal lives (McClellan, 2007).

Although many roles of advisors are well recognized, the leadership role which is essential to the growth and development of students is not one of them (Paul, Smith and Dochney, 2012). According to Selke and Wong, advisors have a determining role on the success of the graduate students (Bloom, Cuevas, Hall and Evans, 2007).

Effective academic advisors are motivated to serve the students with compassion and willingness to serve and they attach a high importance to their development. This motivation presents the difference between traditional advising and developmental advising (McClellan, 2007).

The objectives of the graduate programs can be served effectively by the servant leadership behavior of the academic advisors who are closest and the most influential role model to the student. It is highly plausible that the servant leadership behavior in academic advising plays an important role in the development of students, especially at the graduate level that students make their career choices. In this study academic advising, the developmental approach in academic advising, the servant leadership concept, the relationship between the developmental academic advising and servant leadership behavior at doctoral studies are investigated and a model is proposed that indicates the contribution of servant leadership behavior of the advisors to the achievements of the graduates both for themselves and for the society.

## 1. Academic Advising and Servant Leadership

### 1.1. Academic Advising

The focus of academic advising is to direct the students in their choice of the major field of study and help them arrange their lives on the basis of their choice (Crookston, 1994). The advisor with his/her intellectual and emotional tone becomes highly significant in the student's educational process (Bargar and Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983).

Basic roles for advisors can be stated as being a source of reliable information, departmental socializer, advocate, role model and occupational socializer. According to Ahern and Manathunga (2004), advisors at the doctoral studies should be “clutch starters” for their stalled advisees, meaning advisors knowing when their students are stalled, determining the cause of the stall as well as supporting and encouraging the student to move again (Barnes and Austin, 2009).

There are two contrasting behavioral styles in the advising approach. In prescriptive advising the advisor-student relationship is based on authority; the advisor teaches and the student learns. It is assumed that most of the advisor's responsibility is to give advice and the student's responsibility is to follow the advice.

Since the student perceives his/her advisor as the authority, he/she feels no responsibility when the results are unsatisfactory and may blame the advisor (Crookston, 1994). In developmental advising, the advising relationship is far from being authoritative; both the advisor and the student are involved differently in some developmental work and both learn from the successful results at different levels. The two different approaches in the academic advisor - student relationship on the basis of ten basic dimensions are listed in Table 1.

The prescriptive advisor considers his student as immature, irresponsible and in need of control. Whereas the prescriptive advisor has the whole authority in this hand, the developing advisor shares the responsibility and authority with his student since he/she considers the student as mature, responsible and having self-control. The developing advisor perceives learning as the sharing of experiences and he knows that this is the only way the student can learn.

**Table 1: Comparison of the Dimensions of Prescriptive and Developmental Approaches to Advising**

<b>In term of</b>	<b>Prescriptive</b>	<b>Developmental</b>
Abilities	Focus on limitations	Focus on potentialities
Motivation	Students are lazy, need prodding*	Students are active, striving*
Rewards	Grades, credit, income	Achievement, mastery, acceptance, status, recognition, fulfillment
Maturity	Immature, irresponsible; must be closely supervised and carefully checked*	Growing, maturing, responsible, capable of self-direction*
Initiative	Advisor takes initiative on fulfilling requirements; rest up to student	Either or both may take initiative
Control	By advisor	Negotiated
Responsibility	By advisor to advise By student to act	Negotiated
Learning output	Primarily in student	Shared
Evaluation	By advisor to student	Collaborative
Relationship	Based on status, strategies, games, low trust	Based on nature of task, competencies, situation, high trust

\*After McGregor's (1960) X and Y theories.

**Source:** Crookston, 1994, p.7

Advising relationship is a mutual agreement between the advisor and the student and the advisor has to focus on the potential of the student so that the student can achieve self-control. On the other hand, in prescriptive advising, the advisor holds the authority and the whole relationship is limited by the requirements of the curriculum and control (Frost, 1993).

Advising, just like teaching, should involve the behavior modification capacity and provide new perspectives for thoughts. Accordingly, students should evaluate their advisors as guides that can equip them with the required skills for their future plans, not just the person that answers their questions related to the courses (Frost, 1993). Especially at the doctoral level, the role of academic advisors become more and more important since the students are more mature, more focused, more research oriented and prone to analytical thinking.

## 1.2. Servant Leadership

Greenleaf is the originator of the term "servant leadership" which denotes a person for whom serving is the first priority (Greenleaf, 1991). A servant leader strives to provide growth, benefit and success for those he/she serves (Paul et al., 2012).

In hierarchical leadership, the power of the leader stems from his position and the leader is obeyed by the subordinates. In servant leadership, however, the source and use of power changes completely. According to Stone, among the unique characteristics of servant leader are follower-focused attitude and *primus inter pares* - first among equals- position. While being follower-focused attitude leads to the safe and strong relationships in the organization, *primus inter pares* position involves the servant leader not using his power to get things done, but persuading and convincing people with the power of service (Prosser, 2010).

As stated by Magoni, the pyramid-shaped traditional, hierarchical relationship where power and influence flow top-down is inverted in servant leadership. Servant leaders recognize the ability of people to contribute to the well-being of the organization that they are capable of and help them contribute. According to Turner, servant leaders are to discover the gifts that each person is uniquely capable of contributing to the common good and help them give it.

This fosters individual responsibility and the creative use of each member's abilities whereby, the individual responsibility and the creative use of each member's abilities are flourished (Poon, 2006).

## 2. Servant Leadership Behavior of the Academic Advisors in Graduates Studies

"Graduate education not only produces students with advanced knowledge and skills, it produces critical thinkers and innovators" (Wendler, Bridgeman, Cline, Millett, Rock, Bell, and McAllister, 2010, p.55). Graduate programs are especially effective in preparing students who will lead in the global economy and have the ability to innovate. It is vital that nations invest in higher education and especially graduate education since this is an investment in their future (Wendler et al., 2010).

Thus, developing innovative and relevant educational experiences at the graduate level becomes extremely important for meeting the demands of the global economy (Moore, Tatum and Sebetan, 2011).

In one of the Higher Education Institute's guide, the objective of the PhD programs is defined as the ability to undertake independent research, analytical thinking and synthesis (YÖK, 2013, clause 18). In this process, advisor-advisee relationship, sometimes called mentor-mentee relationship, becomes critically important to find and develop the students' abilities. According to Luna and Cullen, the mentoring role of the advisors is expected to provide benefits for the students in terms of role modeling, guidance and support, listening, enhanced self-confidence and career advice (Paglis, Green and Bauer, 2006).

Both mentor and mentee's self-efficacy may be positively affected by the servant leader traits which include moral love, humility, altruism, self-awareness, authenticity, integrity, trust, empowerment and service. As a result of these positive factors, the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship may be improved; the transformation process in both the mentor and mentee may be facilitated, the end result being the personal and professional development of the mentor and mentee (Poon, 2006).

Although master's programs are frequently in tune with the needs of the workplace, this is hard to state for the doctoral level. There is an urgent need to clarify the career paths for the doctoral students (Wendler et al., 2010).

According to Berelson (1960), Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) and Lovitts (2001), statistics indicate a high over-all drop-out rate for PhD students, between 40% to 50% (Golde, 2005). Therefore, it is extremely important that the advisor be a developmental one in the doctoral study.

The advisors at the graduate level are the most important role models in students' academic lives. Research on MDPHD students indicates that the students express favorable ideas about the advisors who care about them, who are accessible, who are powerful role models, who tailor guidance for each of them and who intentionally integrate them into the profession (Bloom, Cuevas, Hall and Evans, 2007).

McClellan explained the philosophy and practice of servant leadership in order to show how it can contribute to the theory and practice of academic advising. According to Powers and Morris, the dimensions of the servant leaders' characters in the form of building community, commitment to the growth of people, foresight, conceptualization, and awareness are quite similar to the dimensions of the servant teachers' characteristics (McClellan, 2007).

The ten characteristics of servant leadership are listed below in a hierarchal order (Crippen, 2005).

1. Listening: An effective servant leader listens receptively to what the others say, accompanied by regular periods of reflection (Spears, 2004). Thus, listening may be considered as the most important skill in academic advising (McClellan, 2007; Paul et al., 2012).

2. Empathy: The servant leader strives to understand and empathize with others. People are in need of being accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirits. One important characteristic of the servant leader is to understand and empathize with others (Spears, 2004).

Crockett emphasizes the importance of empathy and constructive listening in academic advising (Ryan, 1992). This may be evaluated as a point of convergence between servant leadership and developmental academic advising.

3. Healing: Effective servant leaders should have the potential for healing themselves and others (Spears, 2004). Since many people have a variety of emotional hurts, this is another important characteristic of the servant leader. According to Sturnick, servant leaders who work very hard to restore their own "emotional, spiritual, intellectual and physical health" and also show the "leadership that heals and transforms the quality of life and work within organizations" can foster their own healing through healing others. Like servant leaders, academic advisors healing themselves can reflect on the advisees' healing or vice versa (McClellan, 2007).

Since academic problems affect the advisors directly, they should have basic information about the student's personal life associated with various contingencies, e.g. medical problems, financial aid service, health service, counseling service (Connell, 1985).

4. Awareness: Servant leader's self-awareness is developed through self reflection, listening to other people about himself, through unending desire to learn and connecting from what he/she knows and believes to what he/she says or does (Crippen, 2005).

Awareness is also helpful in understanding issues related to ethics and values and enables one to look at most situations from a more integrated and holistic angle. According to Greenleaf's observations, awareness is a disturber and awakener. Being sharply awake and reasonably disturbed are usual characteristics of able leaders (Spears, 2004).

Advisors should continuously scan their environment both consciously and unconsciously in order to reach as much information as possible. Through awareness, advisors can receive the "interaction based information" that enables them to understand the needs of the students and their own in responding to students (McClellan, 2007).

5. Persuasion: In making decisions, servant leaders depend primarily on persuasion instead of positional authority; the servant leader strives to convince people rather than force obedience. Persuasion is the major difference between the traditional authoritarian leadership and that of servant leadership (Spears, 2004).

University advisors, too, should direct and persuade the students rather than force in their personal and educational decisions. Advisors can be considered as a point of connection between the student and the campus (Ryan, 1992).

6. Conceptualization: Servant leaders should be able to balance conceptual thinking (thinking beyond day-to-day issues) and a day-to-day focused approach (Spears, 2004).

7. Foresight: Foresight, which is deeply rooted within the intuitive mind, helps the servant leader to extract lessons from the past and the present and gain insight into the likely outcome of a decision for the future (Spears, 2004).

In the process of advising, it is vital for the advisors to have the ability to understand the potential of the students and design a plan for achieving that potential (McClellan, 2007). Thus, the combination of foresight and conceptualization becomes an important feature of successful academic advising (Paul et al., 2012).

8. Stewardship: Stewardship is defined as "holding something in trust for another" by Peter Block. Greenleaf views all organizations as entities in which CEOs, staffs and trustees all have important roles in "holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society" (Spears, 2004).

Stewardship is "the senses of responsibility leaders have with regard to the use of the power they possess" (McClellan, 2007, p.47). Advisors enable the students to gain insight to the institution and reach the resources and opportunities, design academic and career plans and have guidance when they face challenges. This indicates that power is the means through which leaders serve. Greenleaf states that power is welcomed when both the user and the subject grow as individuals, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, having more serving capacity. When people are coerced no growth could take place; they can only conform (McClellan, 2007).

A study that explored the perceptions of doctoral advisors about their roles and responsibilities as advisors is worth to mention. In this research, one characteristic of the advisor-advisee relationship specified by the doctoral advisors in connection to power was the collegial characteristic.

In a collegial advising relationship, the power structure is flattened so that the advisee experiences a balanced and equal relationship (Barnes and Austin, 2009).

9. Commitment to the growth of people: Commitment to the development of all individuals in the organization is another characteristic of the servant leader. Servant leaders believe that individuals have an intrinsic value and it is their utmost responsibility to develop it (Spears, 2004).

Such a commitment to the development of students is a basic characteristic and practice of advisors, too. Among the characteristics of the servant leaders, perhaps this is the most central characteristic of advising (McClellan, 2007). Advisors perceive their responsibilities as helping advisees to be successful, to develop as researchers and professionals (Barnes and Austin, 2009).

10. Building community: In a report of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), it is stated that "students learn to become members of their higher education community, think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and prepare to be educated citizens of a democratic society and a global community"(NACADA, 2006).

Socialization is defined as the process through which an individual becomes part of a group, organization, or community (Austin, 2002). Academic advisors form a link between the students and the faculty in doctoral study and the department is the main socialization agent (Golde, 2005). Glennen also emphasized that the advisor is the major interface between the student and the department (Barnes and Austin, 2009). Socialization at the doctoral level can be defined as "the processes through which individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills" (Weidman, Twale and Stein, 2001, p. iii).

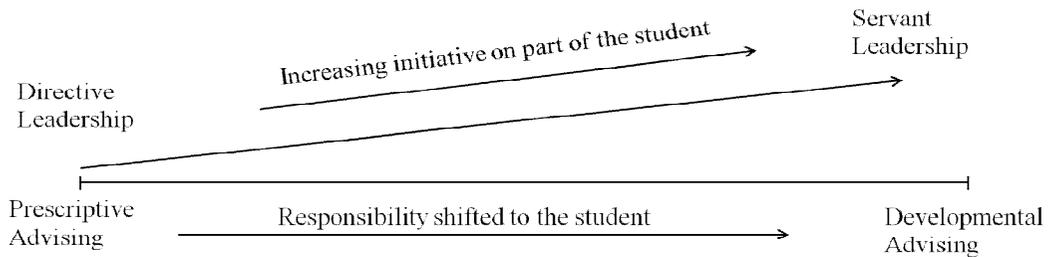
According to Greenleaf, one objective of advising in higher education is "to prepare students to serve and be served by society". Academic advisors with servant leadership approach in the advising process are expected to help the students in integrating the academic achievements with their professional and private lives. Eventually, both the student and the society might benefit through this type of advising (McClellan, 2007).

Servant leadership is adopted by many organizations and individuals as a guiding philosophy; it provides a route to personal growth in terms of spiritual, professional, emotional and intellectual aspects (Spears, 2004).

### **3. A System of Graduate Level Study**

The behavioral style and the academic leadership style of the academic advisor in advising process are shown in Figure 1.

The behavioral style continuum consists of the prescriptive advising at one end and developmental advising at the other end, whereas responsibility is shifted step by step to the student throughout the continuum.



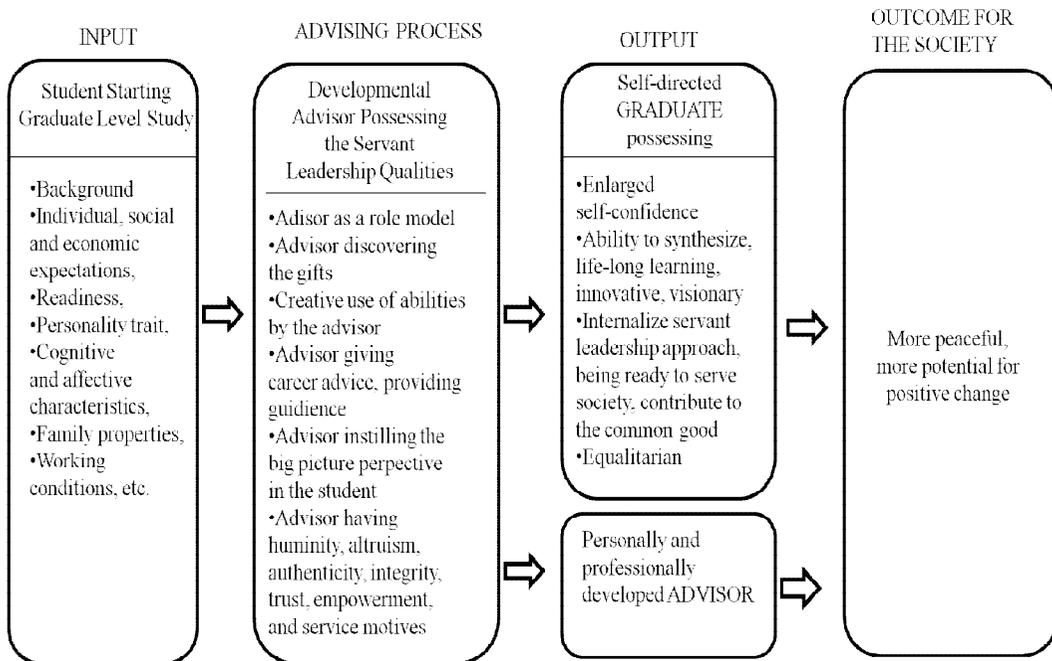
**Figure 1: The Advising Continuum**

The academic leadership style of the advisor, on the other hand, consists of directive (authoritative) leadership at one end proceeding with participative leadership and reaching servant leadership, whereby student's initiative is increased throughout the continuum.

Educational institutions take their inputs from society and give their outputs to society. The input of the graduate level study system is the student starting graduate study. Students bring various expectations, levels of readiness, different personalities, values and beliefs together with them. Figure 2 indicates the input and the output of the advising process. The positive impact of servant leadership on the academic development and professionalism of the graduate student is shown in the figure. The graduate student, the output of the academic program, might be expected to contribute effectively to the positive change and to the development of caring communities in the society.

When the advisor is a developing one possessing the qualities of a servant leader, the graduate student might be expected to have strengthened self-confidence, the ability to synthesize, innovate and be ready to serve society. Since there is a probability for the advisee to be an advisor in his/her future career, it is extremely important that the advisee internalize the characteristics of the servant leadership.

As shown in the figure, the advising process could be a developmental one for the advisor as well. The personal and professional transformation of the academic advisor could contribute to the peace and potential for positive change in the society, just like the advisee.



**Figure 2: A System of Graduate Level Study**

Of course there might be other combinations of academic advising in the model. The advising process might involve different degrees of authority on the part of the advisor associated with different degrees of initiative on the part of the advisee.

Besides servant leadership, other types of advisors with authoritative approach (benevolent autocratic leader) or with participative approach (democratic leader or coach) might also be developmental advisors, depending on the culture of the society and the educational institution. Although all these different types of advisors might be effective on the development of the student, the highest and the most enduring impact seems to be the servant leadership as far as academic development, professionalism and contribution to society are considered, provided that the culture of the country (and the institution) give a chance.

## Conclusion

Graduate level programs are designed to prepare students with self-confidence, analytical thinking and synthesizing ability. Therefore investment in graduate level study in higher education is essential for the welfare of nations. Academic advisor's role in graduate study is critical since the advisor is the main socialization agent between the department and the student.

As indicated in the proposed model, the developmental advisor possessing servant leadership style could be highly effective upon the outcome of the advising process: the graduate who is successful in academic work as well as the socialization process, being a responsible member of the higher education community and ready to serve the society.

Some arrangements are necessary however, for the success of the advising process. Considering the time, effort and money invested in higher education by all the parties involved, it is extremely important that the responsibility of the advisor, advisee and the higher education institution be clearly specified.

Clear definition and communication of the duties and responsibilities of all the parties that have a stake in the advising process is a proper starting point. Since graduate advisors have a determining role on the success of the graduate students, it is essential that they internalize the developmental approach and be a servant leader in the advising process. Training programs might be arranged to achieve this transformation on behalf of the advisor.

Graduate level students should be aware of their responsibility in this process. They should have a clear vision and objective of where they are trying to reach in the future. Considering highly demanding requirements for entering graduate level study and intense workload, they should try to get the maximum benefit out of the advising process, keeping in mind the investment involved and the other students not given the chance for graduate study.

Considering the intense competition in the job market, Higher Education Institutions should enrich the graduate curricula with professional development courses and orientation programs that provide doctoral students with transferable skills valued by employers.

Finally, it should be noted that the society is the eventual beneficiary of a developmental advising process and servant leadership approach in this process. The outcome of such a process, the graduate having self-confidence, self-direction, and vision for sustainable development will be a major contribution to the common good.

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