



Servant Leadership and Industry Transformation: How Servant Leadership Can Transform Industries, with Perspectives from Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Servant leadership has been widely examined and investigated for its influence on employee-level outcomes, which include trust, engagement and satisfaction, among other dimensions, but its potential to drive industry-level transformation remains underexplored. This study investigates how servant leadership facilitates industrial resilience and adaptability with particular interest in employee innovation, trust, and engagement in Zimbabwe, which is a transitional economy facing various structural crises. The study is anchored in Servant Leadership Theory, complemented by Organisational Resilience Theory. The research positions servant leadership as the central explanatory construct, with employee engagement, organisational culture, and technological adaptability serving as the mechanisms through which transformation occurs.

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory design and draws on insights from industry experts to examine how servant leadership pushes collaborative cultures, enhances employee commitment and innovation, and enables technological flexibility. The findings of this study extend servant leadership scholarship beyond micro-level outcomes by putting Zimbabwe as a theoretically meaningful context, where value-based leadership can catalyse industrial renewal. The study contributes theoretically by offering a contextual extension and process model that links servant leadership to industry transformation through employee engagement, culture, innovation, and technological adaptability. The study practically highlights servant leadership's relevance in crisis-driven economies, providing actionable insights for managers and policymakers seeking to rebuild trust, foster innovation, and achieve sustainable industrial growth.

Keywords: Employee engagement; servant leadership; organisational culture; technological flexibility; economic growth; industry transformation

1. Introduction

Leadership approaches are vital in the ever-evolving industry transformation landscape because they influence organisational culture and employee engagement, and foster innovation and industry transformation. Among contemporary leadership approaches is servant leadership, which has gained prominence because of its emphasis on stewardship, community orientation, and empathy (Liden et al., 2008; Van Dierendonck, 2011; Eva et al., 2019). In light of industry change in Zimbabwe, it is particularly relevant to understand the role of servant leadership, where industries are experiencing significant changes due to economic restructuring and technological advances. While the existing scholarship has established employee-level outcomes, such as trust, engagement and satisfaction, there is limited understanding of how servant leadership extends beyond the organisational level to catalyse industry transformation. This study addresses this gap by focusing on Zimbabwe as a theoretically meaningful context where servant leadership can be examined as a driver of industry renewal.

This section offers some background information before examining the link between industry transformation and servant leadership in the context of Zimbabwe's unique socioeconomic context. Although there has been increasing interest in servant leadership, there is a lack of research exploring the role of servant leadership in industry transformation. Prior research has centred on the servant leadership principles of empathy, stewardship and community building, and some, if any, have discussed the role of these principles in facilitating transformative practices in various sectors (Chen et al., 2022; Hanaysha et al., 2022; Hurt & Nolan, 2024). Additionally, the impact of servant leadership on organisational change during crisis or disruption is largely overlooked. Most literature has examined the impact of servant leadership on employee satisfaction and retention, but there is a lack of research on the role of servant leadership in facilitating innovation, market change, and organisational resilience (Ahmad et al., 2023; Guan et al., 2023; Zou et al., 2015).

Zimbabwe's industries face persistent challenges, which include economic volatility, lack of technological advancement, and weakened organisational trust. Such conditions create a pressing need for leadership styles that prioritise ethical responsibility, collective resilience, and employee empowerment. Transformational leadership focuses on vision and change, but servant leadership is unique in that it is suited to crisis-driven economies because it fosters values of service, trust-building and community development (Mason et al., 2014). Servant leadership can strengthen mechanisms through which industries achieve resilience and transformation by having employee engagement, shaping organisational culture, and enabling technological adaptability. Therefore, this study seeks to expand the Servant Leadership Theory by exploring its role in industry-level outcomes. Specifically, it investigates how servant leadership practices influence institutional mechanisms (employee engagement, organisational culture, and technological adaptability), which collectively contribute to industrial adaptability and renewal in Zimbabwe. From the above justification, the research contributes to leadership and organisational change literature by bridging the gap between micro-level and meso-level transformation. Table 1 shows the gap in servant leadership and industry transformation.

Table 1: Study gap on servant leadership and industry transformation. Source: Authors (2026)

Aspect	What is known	What is missing	Citations
Level of analysis	Strong at the individual and organisational level	Weak at the industry or sector level	(Eva et al., 2019; Goestjahjanti et al., 2022; Sohail Younas & Khizer Hayat, 2025)
Context	Some African and Zimbabwean organisational cases	Little on Zimbabwean industries and economic restructuring	(Binha, 2021; Dube et al., 2019; Pillay & Kikasu, 2024)
Mechanism	Links trust, learning, innovation, technological and organisational culture	How these mechanisms scale to transform sectors	(Eva et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2025)

However, the study questions are provided below.

1. How does servant leadership enhance employee engagement in Zimbabwean industries?
2. In what ways does servant leadership shape organisational culture to support industry transformation?
3. How does servant leadership enable technological adaptability in transitional economies?
4. What are the implications of these mechanisms for industry-level resilience in Zimbabwe?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Characteristics of a Servant Leader

The concept of servant leadership has gained prominence for its emphasis on cultivating a culture of service within organisations and prioritising the needs of others. The literature identifies several core attributes of servant leadership. The first is listening and empathy, which constitute the foundation of this leadership style. Servant leaders demonstrate active listening skills and exhibit genuine concern for the perspectives and well-being of others (Greenleaf, 1977). They build rapport and trust with subordinates, which fosters empathy and enhances communication, collaboration and, ultimately, organisational outcomes in the context of Zimbabwe. The second attribute is humility. Servant leaders display humility rather than self-importance recognising both their limitations and the contributions of others. In contrast, the absence of such altruistic leadership in certain sectors of Zimbabwe's economy has contributed to organisational stagnation and failure, as subordinates are undervalued and excluded from decision-making (Hurt & Nolan, 2024). When leaders embrace humility, they create inclusive and empowered organisational cultures where all members are respected and valued, thereby fostering resilience and innovation.

Another attribute of servant leadership is dedication to individual development, which emphasises the leader's support for the career and personal growth of subordinates. This principle aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, as leaders prioritise initiatives that foster the acquisition of skills, coaching, mentoring, and team building (Yang et al., 2025). Within Zimbabwean industries, where economic, social and political transitions continue to reshape the workplace, servant leaders play a critical role in enabling employees to thrive in a dynamic environment by encouraging continuous learning and adaptability (Greenleaf, 1977). Additionally, another defining characteristic is service orientation, which shows the leader's intrinsic desire to serve others. Greenleaf (1977) argued that servant leaders place the needs of stakeholders and followers at the forefront, uplifting individuals to achieve their full potential and thereby advancing organisational outcomes (Hanaysha et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021). However, in a country like Zimbabwe, socio-economic and political constraints mainly hinder the full expression of service orientation, limiting opportunities for employees to be empowered. Despite these challenges, the literature suggests that with supportive institutional environments, Zimbabwe industries could cultivate servant leadership practices that foster inclusivity, resilience, and global competitiveness.

Other key attributes of servant leadership with regard to industry transformation are ethical and value-congruent behaviour, which emphasise moral values at the centre of their practice, acting with honesty, fairness and integrity (Chen et al., 2022). Such leaders build trust and credibility, which are essential for effective leadership in challenging contexts such as Zimbabwe. Industries, including telecommunications and education, illustrate how trust, integrity, and fairness serve as pillars of organisational resilience (Alvarez & Sachs, 2023; Dieguez, 2024). Moreover, empowerment and delegations are another critical characteristic where servant leaders grant authority to subordinates, encouraging responsibility and accountability in pursuit of organisational goals (Zhu & Zhang, 2020). This approach gives employees ownership, innovation and high performance, and has been adopted by successful Zimbabwean organisations to drive growth. The final key attributes are vision and strategic orientation, where servant leaders prioritise the needs of others, and articulate a clear organisational vision and long-term goals that inspire followers through team building and task delegation (Li et al., 2021; Zhu & Zhang, 2020). In Zimbabwe's turbulent socio-economic environment, visionary leadership enables organisations to navigate uncertainty, foster loyalty, and encourage collective effort.

2.2 Servant leadership and Organisational culture

Organisational culture and servant leadership are critical determinants of an organisation's effectiveness, success, and sustainability. Organisational culture encompasses the collective beliefs, ideas, norms, and practices that shape behaviour within the workplace, while servant leadership emphasises the values and practices of leaders (Binha, 2021; Dalain, 2023). Moreover, empirical research demonstrates that servant leadership significantly influences organisational culture through trust, collaboration, and empowerment (Linden et al, 2014). Greenleaf (1977) claims that servant leaders, first and foremost, serve the needs of their followers while exhibiting humility, empathy, and a focus on service to others. Such behaviour not only breeds loyalty and trust but also sets the boundaries for a society that is inclusive, open, and respectful of one another (Greenleaf, 1977). However, in Zimbabwe, socio-economic challenges have undermined trust, respect and loyalty, which remain essential attributes for industrial growth. Spears (1996) argues that servant leaders contribute to cultures of authenticity and ethical behaviour, enabling personal and professional development of employees. The evidence from Zimbabwean industries indicates this dynamic, as organisations have supported employees' academic advancement through initiatives such as weekend schooling to strengthen organisational culture, enhance employee development, and contribute to resilience in contexts marked by political and economic uncertainty (Mayavo & Muzite, 2025).

Studies have demonstrated that servant leadership significantly influences organisational culture by shaping attributes such as teamwork, communication, and employee satisfaction (Xiao et al., 2025). Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) found that a positive association between servant leadership and supportive organisational environments is characterised by effective communication, participative decision-making, and inclusiveness. Such an environment pushes collaboration, innovation and creativity, thereby enhancing organisational performance and agility in times of change (Duchek, 2020; Gao, et al., 2024). More importantly, organisational culture conditions the effectiveness of servant leadership. Its adoption depends on the alignment between servant leadership principles and prevailing organisational beliefs, traditions, and practices. Servant leadership is more prevalent in cultures that emphasise empowerment, trust, and transparency (Shofia, et al., 2024). In Zimbabwe, servants contribute to employee engagement by reinforcing ethical behaviour, integrity, and authenticity, which are essential for building resilient organisational cultures. However, hierarchical and authoritarian cultures may inhibit its effectiveness, as servant leadership challenges established norms. Eventually, servant leadership and organisational culture are mutually reinforcing; culture shapes leadership practices, while servant leadership fosters a culture of empowerment, collaboration, and trust (Pillay & Kikasu, 2024). Understanding this reciprocal relationship is critical for promoting quality, sustainability, and service, with a special focus on Zimbabwean industrial transformation.

2.3 Servant Leadership vs. Employee Engagement

Organisational behaviour research demonstrates the significance of the servant leadership-employee engagement connection in enhancing organisational efficiency, sustainability, and performance (Eva et al., 2019). Servant leadership, through its emphasis on serving others, fostering trust, and supporting the subordinate's development, has been shown to positively influence employee engagement. Greenleaf (1977) underscores the critical role of servant leaders in creating empowering environments where employees feel valued and motivated to fully contribute to the organisation, a dynamic that is relevant in Zimbabwe's evolving industry context. Servant leaders encourage continuous learning and adaptability, which strengthens organisational resilience by prioritising follower well-being and growth (Ren et al., 2024). Such behaviours cultivate commitment and passion, increasing discretionary efforts and engagement. In a study by Liden (2008), it was found that empowerment, humility, and stewardship foster collaboration and trust, providing psychological safety that enables risk-taking and innovation. Inclusive cultures shaped by servant leadership enhance organisational commitment and satisfaction

through a sense of belonging and purpose. Employees are willing to put in more effort when they identify with organisational values and feel emotionally connected to their work.

Servant leadership enhances employee engagement through its emphasis on meeting the subordinates' needs, fostering positive attitudes and empowering work cultures, and modelling ethical and authentic behaviours (Hanaysha et al., 2022). These organisational practices cultivate loyalty, trust and commitment, which are essential for organisational productivity and success. In the context of Zimbabwean industries, understanding this relationship is critical to creating environments that support employee engagement and drive industrial transformation (Dube et al., 2019). Servant leadership behaviours, such as prioritising employee development, promoting inclusivity, and demonstrating integrity, heighten engagement by aligning organisational practices with employee values and aspirations. In the context of a country marked by socio-economic challenges, such as Zimbabwe, these attributes are particularly important for building resilience and advancing organisational performance. If servant leadership principles are embedded in organisations in Zimbabwe, they can foster a culture of empowerment and service, positioning themselves to regain competitiveness and sustainability.

2.4 Servant Leadership vs. Adapting Technological Advancement

The integration of new technologies presents both opportunities and challenges for organisations, requiring adaptability and innovation from leaders. Studies demonstrate the role of servant leadership in facilitating organisational readiness for technological change by advocating for empowerment, vision, and collaboration (Zorlu et al., 2021). Greenleaf's 1977 framework emphasises that servant leaders prioritise the needs of their subordinates, encourage communication, and create a supportive environment where employees are motivated to experiment with new technologies and embrace change. Such attributes of behaviours cultivate trust and psychological safety, enabling risk-taking, innovation, and skills development, which are critical for productivity gains through lean and quality management systems (Liden et al., 2014).

Servant leadership also strengthens organisational commitment and motivation, linking technological adoption to broader strategic goals. Servant leaders help employees view technology as an opportunity for growth rather than a threat (Yang et al., 2025). Nonetheless, a hierarchical and authoritarian culture prevalent in the Zimbabwean industries may inhibit good servant leadership practices, limiting employee openness and collaboration (Guan et al., 2023). Organisations in Zimbabwe could fully realise the benefits of servant leadership adaptation by cultivating cultures of transparency, teamwork, and continuous learning. Ultimately, servant leadership enhances resilience and adaptability, positioning Zimbabwean industries to leverage technological advancements for sustainable transformation.

2.5 How can Zimbabwe benefit from servant leadership and innovation?

Zimbabwe, along with many other nations, can benefit from integrating servant leadership practices with an innovative culture. Servant leadership is transformative because it emphasises empowerment, collaboration, and stakeholder growth (Saleem et al., 2020). Servant leaders enable collective problem-solving by prioritising follower needs, building trust, and fostering supportive environments, which is particularly valuable in addressing Zimbabwe's socio-economic challenges. Moreso, innovation is critical for economic development and global competitiveness, allowing organisations to identify opportunities, improve processes, and generate creative solutions (Greenleaf, 1977). Also worth noting is that servant leaders foster innovation by encouraging experimentation, openness to change, and organisational readiness through empowerment and vision. Additionally, servant leadership promotes ethical behaviour, accountability and transparency, helping to counter inequality, corruption and institutional distrust (Smith et al., 2019). Leaders can rebuild trust in both public and private organisations in Zimbabwe, advancing sustainable development by modelling integrity and authenticity. Innovation, supported by servant leadership, enhances resilience, productivity, and

competitiveness, driving social and economic transformation (Van Knippenberg, 2020). For Zimbabwe to achieve sustainable growth and regain regional prominence, it must prioritise servant leadership while cultivating an innovative culture that empowers employees, strengthens institutional support, and promotes industrial diversification.

2.6 Servant Leadership and Sustainable Industry Transformation

Servant leadership, characterised by a leader's focus on the needs of others, empowerment, and heavy emphasis on the well-being and development of their followers, can help achieve sustainable economic growth. Greenleaf (1977) describes servant leaders as prioritising the needs of their followers and creating an environment of trust and collaboration that encourages people to work towards a common goal. Furthermore, servant leaders play a key role in fostering innovation, entrepreneurship, and inclusive economic development within sustainable economic transformation (Asiyai, 2014; Zorlu et al., 2021). By practising servant leadership, people, especially those from disadvantaged regions, can be empowered to maximise their potential and engage in productive economic activities in Zimbabwe, thereby contributing to economic growth and industry transformation in the country. Moreover, servant leaders foster an ethical culture within their organisations and place a greater emphasis on long-term rather than short-term gains. The integrity, humility and honesty demonstrated by servant leaders are required for a company strategy to be successful, argues Spears (1996). Servant leaders promote ethical decision-making, transparency, and accountability to build stakeholder trust, attract capital, and create a culture that fosters business growth and success.

Moreover, servant leaders are proficient in building positive collaborative relationships with various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit organisations, and community groups, which offer more economic guidance that enhances the sustainable development of Zimbabwean industries (Ahmed et al., 2013; Cheng & Yang, 2019). Collaborative efforts by servant leaders enable them to leverage their networks, resources, and insights to address complex socioeconomic challenges and promote inclusive and sustainable economic development. Liden et al. (2008) assert that organisational readiness for change and innovation is positively influenced by servant leadership behaviours such as empowerment and vision. This is important for sustainable economic and technological adaptability in Zimbabwe, and servant leaders can enhance competitiveness, productivity, and efficiency, and foster innovation and continuous improvement in the Zimbabwean industry (Javed et al., 2018; Saleem et al., 2020; Umah et al., 2024), which promotes sustainable transformational growth for Zimbabwe. As a result, servant leadership can promote inclusive growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship to promote both industry transformation and sustainable economic growth. As such, organisations and governments seeking to build more inclusive economies for all stakeholders should focus on servant leadership, and Zimbabwe has no choice but to adopt and train servant leaders.

Table 1 above illustrates the impact of servant leadership on various industries in other countries. Table 2 below shows transformational success factors.

Table 2: Transformational success factors. Sources: (García Martín et al., 2023; Indarta et al., 2024; Yeung, 2023).

Transformation Success Factors			
Industry Sector	Servant Leadership Implementation Level	Transformation Impact	Critical Gaps
Healthcare	High	Crisis management, employee well-being, reduced turnover	Integration with digital health, virtual care
Education	High	Employee well-being, service quality	Adaptation to online/hybrid learning
Technology	Moderate–High	Service quality, innovation	Servant leadership in agile/remote teams
Aerospace/Defense	Moderate	Sustainable development, corporate social responsibility, long-term transformation	Hybrid models, cross-cultural adaptation
Maritime/Travel	Moderate	Service innovation, organizational change	Generalizability, small sample sizes
Research Collaborations	Moderate	Trust, teamwork, innovation	Servant leadership in cross-sector, virtual teams

2.7 Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in Servant Leadership Theory, which was originally conceptualised by Greenleaf (1977; 1991) and later refined by Liden (2008), Van Dierendonck (2011), and Eva et al. (2019). This theory emphasises values of stewardship, empowerment, community development and humility, and positions leaders as facilitators of collective growth instead of controllers of organisational outcomes. While this theory has been highly studied at the micro-level, improving satisfaction, trust and engagement, its potential to drive industry transformation (Musyafa'ah et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2019) remains under-researched. This study extends Servant Leadership Theory by examining how its principles operate at the meso level, influencing organisational mechanisms that collectively contribute to industrial resilience.

Organisational Resilience Theory is integrated to strengthen the framing of this framework, which explains how institutions adapt and thrive under conditions of volatility and crisis, such as those in Zimbabwe (Duchek, 2020; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). This theory demonstrates adaptability, innovation, and cultural cohesion as critical enablers of survival and transformation. Combining Servant Leadership Theory and Organisational Resilience Theory, the study situates servant leadership not only as a value-based leadership style, but it also confirms the mechanisms for enabling adaptability in fragile economies such as Zimbabwe's.

Servant leadership and employee engagement foster commitment, motivation, and resilience among employees, which increases organisational capacity to respond to industrial challenges. Also worth noting is that servant leadership and organisational culture nurture collaborative, collective problem-solving, and trust-based cultures that support innovation (Lee et al., 2024). In the same vein, servant leadership and technological adaptability encourage learning and flexibility; servant leaders enable organisations to adopt new technologies and remain competitive in dynamic environments (Alvarez & Sachs, 2023). Adopting Servant Leadership Theory and Organisational Resilience Theory enables organisations to tap into their employees' potential to drive innovation, reshape industries, and contribute to the overall well-being of Zimbabwe's society and industries. Therefore, for organisations and leaders to thrive during industry changes in Zimbabwe towards sustainable development and transformation of the industry, they should adopt the servant leadership approach.

2.8 Conceptual model

The study's conceptual model is presented below as Figure 1.

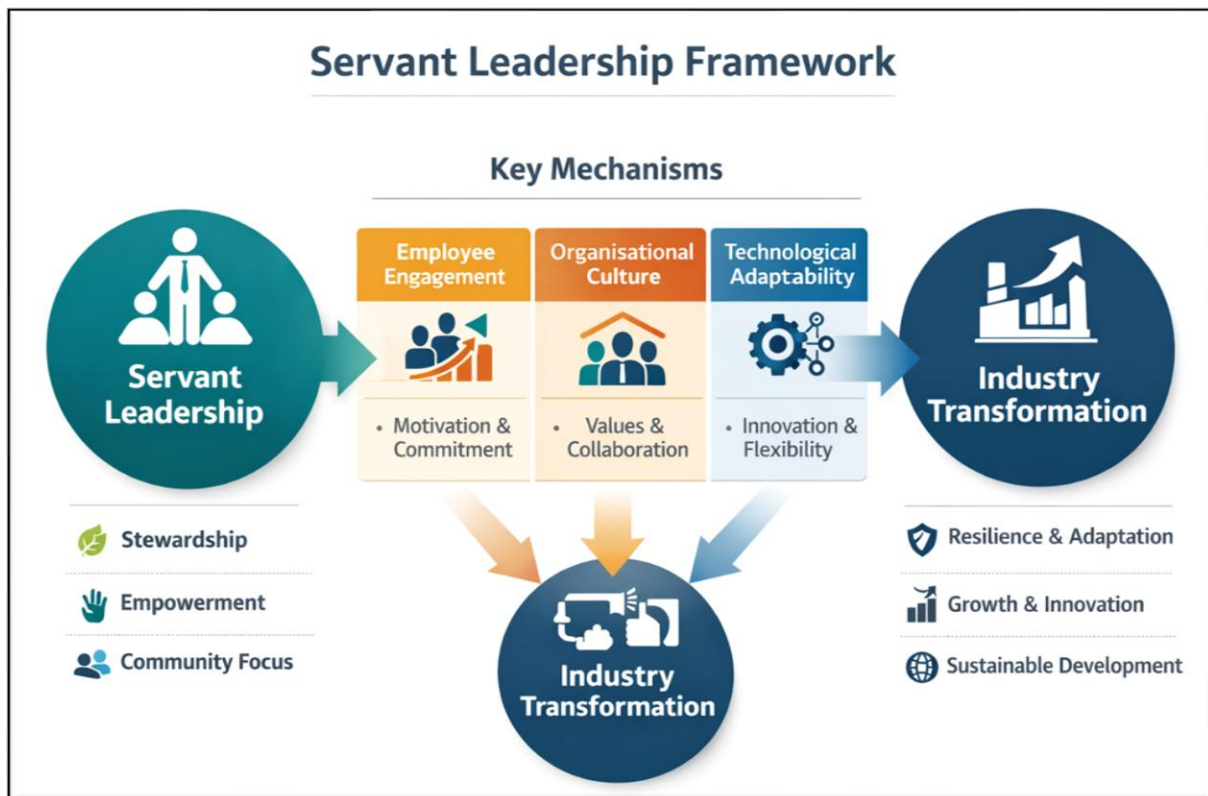


Figure 1: Conceptual model. Source: Authors' Construct (2026).

Figure 1 above shows the servant leadership's relationship with mechanisms such as engagement, culture and adaptability, and the outcome, which is industry transformation. Servant leadership is the central explanatory construct, and the mechanisms, such as contextual factors and industry transformation, are the outcomes framed in resilience, growth, innovation, and sustainable development.

3. Research Methodology

This section of the study focuses on the methodology used and how the participants were sampled, data collected and analysed.

3.1 Research Context

This was a qualitative study, chosen because this type of study leads to rich data collection and the participant can freely give their feedback (Butcher, 2022; Gill et al., 2008). The expert participants were from different industries, including food, banking, sales and marketing, farming, government, IT Admin, and engineering. The participants are students in the Midlands State University weekend school (Master of Commerce in Strategy and Innovation, and Master of Commerce in Strategic Management and Corporate Governance) weekend school, but they are fully employed in these industries. The comments on servant leadership and industry transformation are their individual ones, not on behalf of any organisation. Purposive sampling was adopted for this study to select the participants. The inclusion requirement was that they must be an expert in their field, fully employed with five years or more experience, and the exclusion criteria were if the expert was not employed, or if they had less than five

years' experience. Based on studies, one is declared an expert after having worked for 5-10 years (Ericsson, 2014). This refinement addresses concerns about the weak definition of industry experts. Additionally, reflexivity was maintained to mitigate risks of the researchers' positionality, given the fact that the researchers' academic affiliation is between the researchers and the participants.

Table 3: Gender. Authors' Construct (2026)

Gender	Number of participants
Male	7
Female	4
Total	11

Table 3 above shows the gender of the participants, which includes 7 males and 4 females. Because there is not much of a difference, the participants are more or less balanced. Based on qualitative studies, 11 participants are regarded as enough, as the saturation point for themes can start at as little as 6, depending on the type of research, and this study's participants are taken as a homogeneous sample (Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010).

3.2 Measurement and Research Instrument

An interview guide was developed. Once the guide was developed, the questions were then translated into a Google form, which was sent to participants to respond. The themes revolved around organisational culture, employee engagement, technological flexibility and adaptability, employee innovativeness, problem-solving behaviour, and economic growth. These were based on the research questions. Trustworthiness was achieved through transparency and serious data documentation, and credibility was achieved through accurately stating the findings of the study, as they reflect participants' views (Ahmed, 2024).

3.3 Sample and Data Collection

The Google form was circulated by the researchers, and the responses were captured in the Google form and downloaded into Microsoft Excel. Instead of using qualitative data analysis tools such as Nvivo or Atlast.ti., the researchers decided to do manual coding (reading and preparing, classifying, and interpreting and coding). The response from the participant was considered as informed consent to be part of the study. A purposive sampling was used to arrive at the sample size for this study. The 11 samples were sufficient to come up with acceptable qualitative results (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The study results are discussed below, and the researchers made use of the codes generated through ATLAS.ti, as follows:

4.1 Methods

The researchers screened the data for completeness before uploading it to ATLAS.ti. The researchers then uploaded the data into ATLAS.ti for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns. Initially, the codes that the tool produced were a total of 59 and merged the codes to 20 only because their codes were identical. Eventually, the themes were compared to the objectives of the study, and the final themes were produced after further merging them. Only five themes remained using axial coding. The process was documented and presented in this study to ensure transparency and dependability. Additionally, member checking and peer debriefing enhanced credibility, while an audit trail of coding decisions supported confirmability of the study. The five themes are dedication to individual development, employee engagement, servant leadership, organisational culture, and technological flexibility, and these codes are relevant to this study. The study addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The description of the Zimbabwean context supports

transferability, while reflexive journaling and triangulation strengthen the dependability and confirmability of this study. These codes were then used to come up with results, which the researchers discuss below.

5. Results

The results of the study are discussed in detail below and are provided in sub-themes. The themes provided help to answer the research questions as stated in the introduction of this study.

5.1 Employee Engagement.

Participants reported that their servant leadership can help improve the industry transformation through engagement with employees, which in turn delivers well-being to people in the communities. *"Servant leadership is crucial to enhancing engagement in the industry, particularly when the industry is in trouble or in transition. Servant leadership emphasises the growth and well-being of people and the communities in which they live."* The comments were consistent with the sources referred to in the literature review above, and, as Greenleaf (1977) noted, point out the importance of servant leaders in creating an environment that is empowering and supportive, where employees feel valued, respected, and motivated to do their best to improve and adapt to the changes in the environment.

Another participant of the study added that servant leadership has helped employees to take up more roles without being forced or coerced, and *"...has helped employees participate in new work role definitions and shape organisations' approach to work"*. Another participant wrote the following: *"I believe that servant leadership could improve economic growth in Zimbabwe in a number of ways. First, servant leaders can foster a more positive and productive work culture, which can increase employee engagement and retention."* Servant leaders prioritise followers' well-being and development by first listening to their concerns and then helping them to achieve their full potential, which may boost the economy in Zimbabwe, according to Cheng and Yang (2019) and Shaasha et al. (2024). This helps employees feel valued, committed and motivated, thereby increasing engagement and discretionary effort and giving of their best.

The results consistently described servant leadership as emphatic, empowering, and creating an environment where employees feel valued and motivated. One of the participants pointed out that servant leadership *"makes us feel part of the solution, not just workers"*, showing the relational dimension of engagement. The findings are aligned with Liden et al. (2008), who identified empowerment and altruistic calling as central to servant leadership. In Zimbabwe's volatile industries, engagement was not merely an outcome but also a resilience mechanism, and employees who felt trusted and supported were more willing to adapt to uncertainty and contribute to collective problem-solving. This shows that servant leadership transforms engagement into a strategic resource for industrial renewal.

5.2 Organisational Culture

One participant indicated that one leader has turned his organisation around in terms of organisational culture: *"He has transformed the organisation's culture to a non-toxic, progressive, and learning culture-oriented place. Practising servant leadership in Zimbabwean industries that are experiencing challenges or change can improve employee engagement."* This statement appears to agree with the literature, which says empirical evidence shows that servant leadership is an important predictor of organisational culture, creating a positive culture of trust, empowerment and collaboration (Mumford et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2018). Another participant said, *"Through building trust, giving power and authority, providing development opportunities, encouraging collaboration, appreciation and recognition, servant leaders establish a conducive work environment for employees to remain engaged even in times of change or challenges."*

The statement is in line with Greenleaf (1977), who claims that servant leaders prioritise the needs of their followers, while exhibiting humility, empathy, and commitment to serving others. These behaviours not only lead to trust and loyalty but also set the boundaries for a society that is inclusive, open, and empathetic towards one another. Furthermore, in an organisational context, servant leadership and organisational culture are intertwined and influence each other. Organisational culture affects the implementation and success of servant leadership, but, equally, servant leadership behaviours can enhance organisational culture so that it is positive, characterised by empowerment, trust, and collaboration (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; Van Knippenberg, 2020).

The study revealed that servant leadership fosters collaborative and ethical cultures. Respondents emphasised transparency, shared decision-making and respect as defining features of servant-led organisations. These cultural attributes counteract hierarchical and politicised norms that often undermine trust in Zimbabwean industries. Based on Van Dierendonck's (2011) argument that servant leadership builds authenticity and trust, the findings here extend this claim by showing how cultural transformation at the organisational level can aggregate into industry-wide adaptability. Servant leadership truly shapes culture into a platform for innovation and resilience, enabling industries to withstand structural challenges.

5.3 Technological Flexibility

One participant said that technological flexibility helps by listening to employee experiences and exposure, *"by listening to employees' experiences and exposures that inform their knowledge and opinions on which technology best works for their roles and the organisation."* Another participant said that *"all levels of the organisation are involved. There is no monopoly over innovation and agility, so submissions are made from the most unexpected quarters and people."* Another participant said servant leadership helps with technological adaptability and flexibility in Zimbabwean industries: *"Servant leadership can help with technological adaptability and flexibility in Zimbabwean industries, which are changing rapidly by fostering empowerment, collaboration, continuous learning, adaptability, and the well-being of employees. Of course, high-performing employees of servant leaders are empowered to experiment and play with new technologies, share ideas, and embrace change in a safe environment"* (Arnold & Loughlin, 2013; Jiang et al., 2024). Servant leadership has its beneficial changes. One participant had this to say about technological flexibility: *"Servant leadership can promote technological adaptability and flexibility in Zimbabwean industries facing rapid changes by creating a culture of continuous learning and innovation within the company and encouraging employees to use new technology and experiment with it."*

In addition, one participant said, *"This includes developing skills within the organisation to support the digital shift and becoming a disruptor in the financial sector, and such initiatives are crucial for the bank to adapt to and adopt new technologies, which is essential for staying competitive in an increasingly digital world."* This is in line with research that states that servant leadership enables employees to be empowered and have a safe and supportive work environment. There is evidence that servant leadership has a positive impact on organisations' readiness for change, and technology would increase productivity in the industry as organisations adopt lean and quality management systems to increase production (Jin Nam Choi et al., 2009; Lowe et al., 1996). Liden et al. (2008) found that organisations' readiness for change was higher when servant leadership behaviours were employed, such as empowerment and vision.

Technological adaptability emerged as a critical mechanism linking servant leadership to industry transformation. Participants described servant leaders as facilitators of learning, encouraging experimentation and reducing fear of failure. One manager observed that servant leaders *"give us space to try new systems without punishment"*, underscoring the role of psychological adaptation. This finding resonates with resilience theory, which identifies adaptability and innovation as essential for industry survival in turbulent times. In Zimbabwe, where industries face technological lag, servant leadership's

emphasis on empowerment and continuous learning provides a system that can be a pathway to modernisation and competitiveness.

5.4 Dedication to individual development

One participant noted: *"Encouraging open communication: offering opportunities for open dialogue and enabling idea sharing and collaboration can promote innovative problem solving."* Another participant added that collaboration is the way to go through cross-functional collaboration: *"They can also encourage cross-functional collaboration, provide autonomy, and recognise and reward creativity, empowering staff members to think creatively and provide innovative solutions to overcome the challenges of the transition."* Previous studies have shown that one of the key tenets of servant leadership is based on dedicated individual development as supported by the literature, which says that the growth of servant leadership's subordinates' careers and personal lives is a top priority for servant leaders' interfaces with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Sun et al., 2021). A participant stated, *"Servant leadership can create an environment of empowerment, collaboration, learning ability, flexibility and well-being that enhances a technology-adaptive and flexible culture in Zimbabwean industries that are rapidly changing. Of course, servant leadership has demonstrated its positive changes."*

Literature also highlighted that servant leadership helps people achieve their highest potential in Zimbabwean industries. Leaders should invest time and money in training programmes that promote skills development, mentoring, coaching, and team building (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leaders help their followers thrive in a rapidly changing environment by cultivating a culture of ongoing learning, as in the case of Zimbabwe, where there have been economic, social, and political changes.

5.5 Servant Leadership and Industry Transformation

Servant leadership could potentially improve economic growth in Zimbabwe by fostering a work environment that prioritises the growth and development of its employees, which in turn can boost productivity and innovation. Focusing on the well-being and growth of their employees and supporting them in times of difficulty can lead to a more engaged and motivated workforce. One participant said, *"Through the encouragement of innovation and entrepreneurship, it is able to attract and retain talent by offering a positive working environment and better leadership."* Servant leaders create an environment of trust and collaboration that motivates individuals to work hard towards shared goals. Servant leaders play a crucial role in promoting innovation, entrepreneurship, and inclusive economic growth within the context of sustainable economic growth (Ekmekcioglu & Öner, 2024; Ren et al., 2024). Through servant leadership, people, especially those from underdeveloped areas, can be motivated to optimise their potential and undertake meaningful economic activities in Zimbabwe that will lead to economic growth in the country.

One participant said this, *"To facilitate innovativeness and creative problem solving in Zimbabwean industries during industrial transitions, servant leaders can foster a safe environment where their subordinates can take risks and participate in the sharing of information."* But some other participants indicated that servant leadership is challenging due to the working environment in the country and an unwillingness to share information. *"Human capital management: Zimbabwe's public service is known for its lazy, underperforming, and unmotivated human capital that is unresponsive to its clients. This can be a major challenge for servant leaders when it comes to managing and motivating their teams."* Another participant said, *"There might be a cultural reluctance to share information and ideas, and employees may not be encouraged to speak out or take risks."* And another participant noted that there is a lack of trust and openness in the work environment, which could make servant leadership a challenge, *"This could impact agility and doing one's part to complete 'the bigger picture'. One potential difficulty is that servant leadership requires a high level of trust and openness, which can be difficult to achieve in the Zimbabwean context."* As such, the previous statements made by the participants are in line with the literature; servant leadership can significantly promote sustainable

economic growth, which is where a leader's focus is on serving and empowering others, and where a high value is placed on the development of others. Greenleaf (1977) defines servant leaders as those who focus on the followers.

The integration of mechanisms for industry transformation shows that there is an interplay between engagement, organisational culture, and adaptability, illustrating how servant leadership transcends micro-level outcomes to influence meso-level transformation. These mechanisms collectively push resilience, innovation, and sustainable growth, which are key indicators of industry transformation. More importantly, the findings demonstrate that servant leadership is not only about values but also enables systemic changes. Situating Zimbabwe as a case study, the research demonstrates how servant leadership operates under conditions of fragility, extending theory into new contexts and offering practical insights for transitional economies.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study contributes by offering a contextual extension of servant leadership theory and advancing a process model that links servant leadership to industry transformation. It integrates Servant Leadership Theory with Organisational Resilience Theory, demonstrating that servant leadership can serve as a catalyst for adaptability in crisis-driven contexts. The dual framing strengthens theoretical coherence and positions servant leadership as both a value-based and strategically adaptive leadership model.

Practically, the findings of the study suggest that Zimbabwean industries can leverage servant leadership principles to rebuild trust, foster collaboration, and accelerate technological modernisation. Leadership development programmes should emphasise empathy, stewardship, and empowerment as strategic competencies. Managers should institutionalise collaborative practices and champion continuous learning to enhance adaptability. Policymakers can integrate servant leadership values into industrial strategies to strengthen ethical governance and stakeholder trust.

7. Managerial Implications

The findings of the study demonstrate that servant leadership is not only a moral philosophy but also a strategic tool for industrial renewal in Zimbabwe. By using employee engagement, shaping organisational culture, and enabling technological adaptability, servant leaders create conditions that support resilience, innovation, and sustainable transformation. Managers should prioritise training programmes that embed servant leadership principles such as empathy, stewardship and empowerment. Leadership development initiatives must move beyond technical skills to cultivate relational and ethical competencies. This prepares leaders to guide organisations through volatility while maintaining trust and collaboration. Industry leaders should actively promote inclusive and participatory cultures.

Servant leadership encourages shared decision-making and transparency, which can counteract hierarchical and politicised organisational norms prevalent in Zimbabwe. Managers can institutionalise practices such as open forums, team-based problem-solving, and recognition systems that reinforce collaboration and innovation. Additionally, servant leadership should champion continuous learning and digital literacy as part of organisational strategy. Managers can accelerate industrial modernisation by empowering employees to experiment with new technology and adapt to change. This is particularly critical in Zimbabwe, where technology lag has hindered competitiveness. Investment in training and innovation hubs can support this adaptability.

Policymakers and industry leaders should integrate servant leadership values into the governance framework. Ethical stewardship and community orientation can strengthen stakeholder trust, which is essential for industrial growth in fragile economies. Managers should align organisational strategies with broader societal objectives and goals, ensuring that industrial transformation contributes to sustainable development. Additionally, managers should avoid aspirational claims and focus on feasibility and incremental changes, as servant leadership has the framework for prioritising initiatives

that build resilience, such as employee empowerment and technological adaptability, before pushing onto ambitious national economic targets.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study sought to investigate how servant leadership facilitates industry transformation in Zimbabwe through the mechanisms of employee engagement, organisational culture, and technological adaptability. The study was anchored in Servant Leadership Theory and complemented by Organisational Resilience Theory. It provided evidence that value-based leadership can catalyse industrial renewal in transitional economies. The findings demonstrate that servant leadership fosters trust, collaboration, and empowerment with qualities that enhance engagement and cultural alignment. These mechanisms, in turn, enable organisations to adapt to technological and market change or disruptions, contributing to industry-level resilience.

The study extends servant leadership scholarship beyond micro-level outcomes to meso-level transformation, addressing a critical gap in leadership and organisational literature by situating Zimbabwe as a theoretically meaningful context. The study recommends that organisations should design leadership training programmes that embed servant leadership principles, focusing on empathy, empowerment, and ethical decision-making. Additionally, industry leaders should promote inclusive and collaborative cultures that encourage shared responsibility and innovation, and servant leaders should champion continuous learning and digital literacy to enhance technological responsiveness. The study further recommends that policymakers should incorporate servant leadership values into national industrial strategies to strengthen ethical governance and stakeholder trust.

9. Limitations/Future Directions of Research

The sample size could be enhanced to make the findings more generalisable (Atieno, 2009; Kothari, 2008) across the board, particularly in Sub-Saharan countries that are facing challenges in servant leadership. The research also may not yield the same results if a different method, such as a quantitative method, is utilised. The way forward may be to use a larger sample size using quantitative methods and compare their findings. The researchers' position as academics within the same institution as the participants may have influenced responses, creating risks of power imbalance and confirmation bias; however, reflexivity and member checking were employed to mitigate such risks. Future studies should consider independent data collection or triangulation with external sources to strengthen credibility.

10. Declarations

There is nothing to declare as no one is financially prejudiced.

We declare that the authors used AI to generate the structure of the manuscript (Introduction, Literature review), including the conceptual model, and the authors edited the work and assume full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of this work.

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