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COMMENTARY

# Serving decision makers and their employees simultaneously: Adopting a balanced approach

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In a discussion on the need for greater reflection and reflexivity in I-O psychology, Hyland (2023) challenged our community to consider "who do we serve?"—those in power, or the working class? Although this sentiment (i.e., upper vs. lower class) has been a topic of debate for quite some time, the purpose of this commentary is to move the discussion forward and argue that the debate is no longer a matter of which group deserves our attention. Rather, it is a matter of how we can simultaneously serve decision makers *and* their employees, because the literature suggests that serving *both* will yield optimal levels of outcomes for employees and organizations (e.g., Gagné, 2018; Jiang et al., 2012; Piening et al., 2014).

As organizational scientists reflect on their personal biases and attempt to answer the question of who they serve—the best answer, rooted in evidence, is that they should always *consider* the group they are naturally inclined to ignore if they want to help their preferred group. For instance, those who strive to appease business executives and senior leaders should consider the ways that employees are impacted because these employees are the engine of the organization—an engine that must be motivated, whereas those who champion the working class need to have buy-in from senior executives in order to ensure human resource (HR) policies and practices work for their constituents.

We conclude with a discussion on servant leadership (Lee et al., 2020), a leadership style that engenders self-reflection as a means for serving the greater good and attaining self-actualization. For the purpose of using our commentary to guide tangible change, we argue that this is an ideal leadership style because the leader naturally considers the needs of their followers while attending to organizational goals.

## Serving different levels of a multilevel system

From a multilevel perspective, processes that occur at higher levels of an organization can impact those at lower levels of that same organization, and vice versa (Morgeson, et al., 2015). This means that decision makers can influence employees, and these same employees can exert influence on the people who steer the organization. When I-O psychologists reflect on who to serve, they will undoubtedly have biases or preferences as Hyland (2023) notes. However, the interconnectedness of people and processes at different levels cannot be ignored.

### *A bias toward appeasing decision makers: Consider the employee*

Hyland (2023) states that there is a school of thought that believes "our science and practice should address the real-world challenges—like managing human capital and maintaining

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competitive advantages" (p. 116). For this school of thought, we contend that HR policies and practices developed by executives may be ineffective if employees do not understand the vision of leadership (Piening et al., 2014). Moreover, an organization's strategies, policies, and practices will have the highest chances of motivating employees if they align with employees' basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Gagné, 2018). Therefore, if decision makers: (a) explain the importance of a plan so the employee *wants* to implement it (supporting autonomy), (b) think of ways to positively reinforce or reward employees who execute that plan (supporting competence), and (c) communicate their plan in the context of shared organizational values or a manner that presents it as a win–win for the employee and organization (supporting relatedness), they should have greater success. As a result, an I-O psychologist with a penchant for serving decision makers will likely succeed in achieving organizational goals if they convince decision makers to align with employee motivations.

### *A bias toward appeasing the working class: Consider the business case*

According to Hyland (2023), another school of thought emphasizes the importance of helping the working class. An I-O psychologist looking to serve the working class needs to understand that decision makers must have buy-in, or they may implement policies and practices with little regard for their employees' attitudes and motivations (Piening et al., 2014). To get buy-in, those advocating for the working class need to communicate the business-case, or organizational benefit, of considering the employee perspective. For instance, meta-analytical evidence suggests that employee *motivation* accounts for unique variance in financial outcomes, when compared to other factors like employee education and experience (Jiang et al., 2012). Therefore, an I-O psychologist serving employees can have greater success in helping these employees if they articulate the relationship between motivation and the success of the business to organizational decision makers. If a decision maker understands how employee attitudes and motivations are linked to tangible outcomes, they should be more likely to collaborate with an I-O psychologist who truly considers the needs of the working class. In this way, I-O psychologists can serve both the needs of the employees and representatives of the organization (e.g., decision makers).

So far, we have advocated for considering stakeholders at different levels of an organization. Taking this sentiment further, we propose that it would be ideal if leaders were adept at not only leading but also serving their employees. In the next few paragraphs, we advocate for I-O psychologists to not only adopt servant leadership principles in their own work but to also help guide leaders toward this philosophy as it should lead to success for the organization, their employees, and the greater good.

## Servant leadership: A balanced approach

Hyland (2023) notes that "we need to share common standards and values to guide our work, evaluate our research, and build evidence-based solutions for real-world problems" (p. 116). We propose that servant leadership should be a guiding principle for our field. It is a leadership style that aligns with our call to always seek to appease *both* decision makers and their employees because it supports a climate and culture that encourages employee well-being, and it contributes to organizational financial success (Bragger et al., 2021). A servant leader is a leader who aims to fulfill the needs of their followers and one who strives to develop them as a core criterion for organizational success (Lee et al., 2020). Importantly, the goal of the servant leader is to improve outcomes for all stakeholders, and meta-analytical evidence suggests that this style of leadership has incremental predictive validity over other leadership approaches, such as transformational leadership (Lee et al., 2020).

Servant leadership aligns with Hyland's (2023) call for greater reflection and reflexivity in I-O psychology because it requires introspection about one's purpose and greater contributions.

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Specifically, a person must reflect on several dimensions—spiritual, cognitive, emotional, social, and moral—to engender this leadership style (Bragger et al., 2021). For example, in an academic setting, an I-O psychologist enacting servant leadership could: (a) sometimes help students with research interests that do not perfectly align with their own, (b) occasionally, if necessary, allow students to take on more responsibilities than they should so they can learn from their mistakes, and (c) promote the work of their students to distinguished colleagues in the department. In an applied setting, a servant leader could: (d) listen to and genuinely consider others' contributing ideas and acknowledge when such ideas may be more effective than their own, (e) support the goals of a follower (in and outside of work) even if it means they may eventually leave the organization for better opportunities, and (f) deliver performance appraisal feedback in a constructive and compassionate manner.

Through attempting to forgo or delay their own immediate self-interests to fill followers' needs for autonomy, achievement, and affiliation, servant leaders gain the trust of their followers and facilitate their development to reach common goals that serve the organization (i.e., decision makers; Eva et. al., 2019). While in the short term, simultaneously attempting to serve both the needs of the employees and decision makers may be challenging and stressful, in the long-term I-O psychologists who attempt to do so will develop skill sets in spiritual, cognitive, emotional, social, and moral domains that facilitate their own advancement as well as the well-being of employees and productivity of the organization (Lee et al., 2020).

## Navigating the challenges of appeasing decision makers and their employees: The case of middle management

Middle management is in an ideal position to be trained to enact servant leadership principles primarily because they are "sandwiched" (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020) between meeting the demands of senior executives (i.e., decision makers) and meeting the needs of their subordinates. Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) bring to light the idea that the middle manager can be an "umbrella carrier" or "protector" by striving to protect subordinates from (the sometimes ruthless) ambitions of decision makers, while also shielding decision makers from employee complaints and adverse consequences. Below, we illustrate the servant leadership dimension of stewardship (i.e., taking responsibility for subordinates and the larger organization), and a strategy that servant leaders use known as boundary spanning (i.e., communicating needs across different levels of an organization). With training from an I-O psychologist who embraces servant leadership, a middle manager could be empowered to meet the needs of the organization and their subordinates.

### *An illustrative example*

Let us say that a manufacturing company has a client requiring an order of product X within a 4-month timespan (constituting an aggressive/unrealistic timeline), and the middle manager *knows* the quota cannot be met with the current staffing levels. If trained in servant leadership principles, the middle manager, in this case, would recognize the financial necessity of satisfying the client (appeasing senior executives at the company), while also acknowledging the fact that subordinates would experience burnout and, possibly, resign if subjugated to an egregiously unfair timeline. A servant leader, in this instance, would attempt to balance meeting (some or most) of the needs of each stakeholder.

Specifically, the middle manager could satisfy decision makers through suggesting a modified timeline (e.g., setting the quota to 40% of product X made in two months instead of 100% made in four months). To get buy-in, the middle manager could utilize boundary spanning—communicating the needs of the organization to employees (e.g., satisfy the client to stay afloat), and communicating the needs of the employees to senior executives (e.g., prevent burnout and turnover). In doing so, the middle manager, as a servant leader, protects their subordinate's well-being and

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keeps them motivated to work toward a more aggressive (but realistic) timeline. Essentially, the middle manager brokers a compromise that each party (decision makers and subordinates) can live with, while also protecting oneself from the worst possible outcome, such as losing subordinates or losing one's job.

## Conclusion

Hyland (2023) raised a dilemma regarding "who do we serve?". We argued that the better question to answer is "how do we serve both decision makers and their employees?" regardless of our biases and personal preferences. We provided evidence for needing to simultaneously serve stakeholders at different levels to achieve optimal levels of organizational goals. Further, we highlighted an ideal leadership style—servant leadership—for researchers and practitioners to consider because it may be particularly effective in balancing I-O psychologists' ability to serve the needs of employees and organizational decision makers. Many I-O psychologists approach their work and stakeholders from a dualistic/either-or perspective. This can result from the personal biases and preferences each individual holds (Hyland, 2023), as well as from training that is siloed or overly focused on a particular perspective or methodology. Hyland (2023) discusses the *law of instruments*, which corresponds to a tendency to design studies that align with methodological expertise. To help counter this limitation, we propose that I-O psychologists should have stronger training in multilevel theorizing (e.g., Morgeson et al., 2015) and methodologies that engender greater insights into cross-level relations between decision makers and their employees.

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