# Contemporary Applications for Leading Accountably Following a Study of Nehemiah as a Servant Leader

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**ABSTRACT:** The authors posit that an empirical leadership scale can be applied to a biblical and historical figure to discover implications for contemporary leaders. The validated Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) was administered for Nehemiah with dimensional observations derived directly from the ESV Bible. Nehemiah's behaviors show how accountability to God and society was, and still is, a primary aspect and lived reality of servant leadership. Four key leadership behaviors are identified and discussed. This research-driven approach highlights contemporary applications for accountable servant leadership

## INTRODUCTION

"Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments!" (Psalm 112:1, ESV). The filial fear that prompts one to be obedient to the ones he loves is what Evans (2021) described as the virtue of accountability. Accountability is one dimension of servant leadership, as defined by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). That is, an accountable person does what is to be done because it is right and he has a sense of responsibility for his life, not out of fear of punishment (Evans, 2021). If, as Evans suggested, accountability is the key to understanding ourselves rightly, then it is wise to understand accountability. In contemporary secular scholarship, accountability is strongly related to good governance and is nowadays considered simply appropriate behavior for the public sector (Koop, 2014). The practice of leading with accountability is multifaceted in that it draws from supporting attributes and behaviors. The biblical prophet and governor Nehemiah was an exemplar for holding himself accountable to God, not as an ideal but as a lived reality. The historical account of Nehemiah's leadership can provide a backdrop for discussion based on empirical scale results followed by personal qualitative reflection regarding implications for today's leaders. This context

is apropos to explore the phenomenon of accountability, especially when viewed through the lens of a modern servant leadership framework.

## CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

The conceptual framework for the current study is based on an overarching focus on dimensions of servant leadership as a research-based leadership theory (Eva et al., 2019). The authors of this paper chose to use dimensions and definitions from the Servant Leadership Survey (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). One dimension, accountability, was selected as a secondary lens through which Nehemiah's leadership was described.

### Servant Leadership

Servant leadership started in the 1970s as a complex and prescriptive definition of leadership in which leaders prioritize the good of others over their own interests (Greenleaf, 1970). Today it has developed into an empirically substantiated, behavioral approach to leadership that is interdependent on social responsibility, ethics, trust, respect, and growth (Northouse, 2016; van Dierendonck, 2011). In the early 2000s, researchers began looking for conceptual foundations among the

**Table 1: SLS Dimensions**

| Standing Back | the extent to which a leader gives priority to the interest of others first and gives them the necessary support and credits |
|---|---|
| Forgiveness | the ability to let go of perceived wrongdoings and not carry a grudge into other situations |
| Courage | the daring to take risks and try out new approaches to old problems |
| Empowerment | a motivational concept focused on enabling people and encouraging personal development |
| Accountability | the act of holding people accountable for performance they can control |
| Authenticity | the ability to experess oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings |
| Humility | the ability to put one's own accomplishments and talents in a proper perspective |
| Stewardship | the willingness to take responsibility for the larger institution and go for service instead of control and self-interest |

*(van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011)*

previously indistinctly defined principles in order to build a theory of servant leadership. In the midst of many unsuccessful attempts by researchers to produce a one-dimensional measure of servant leadership, the work by Liden et al. (2008) validated that servant leadership is a multidimensional process and was the only research by that point where both an exploratory and a confirmatory sample were included (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Seeing this work and the need for a multi-dimensional structure that could withstand many samples, van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) developed an eight-dimensional measure of 30 items for quantifying servant leadership. After completing two qualitative and eight quantitative studies with nearly 1,600 participants in two countries, van Dierendonck and Nuijten concluded that the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) was a valid and reliable instrument. The SLS has since been translated into several languages and validated with confirmatory factor analysis (Kobayashi et al., 2020), as well as confirmed configural equivalence across eight countries (van Dierendonck et al., 2017). Defined in Table 1, the eight dimensions of the SLS are "standing back," "forgiveness," "courage," "empowerment," "accountability," "authenticity," "humility," and "stewardship."

## Accountability

Whereas previous scales focused strongly on the "servant" aspect of servant leadership (e.g., Liden et al., 2008), van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) uniquely included the "leader" aspect of servant leadership. Specifically, they did so by measuring accountability.

Indeed, accountability has been identified as a characteristic of servant leadership in at least six studies since then (Coetzer et al., 2017). Of course, accountability itself has a number of constructs and definitions beyond its core meaning of being called to account, such as culpability and responsiveness (Mulgan, 2000) or responsibility, openness, and answerability (Frederick et al., 2016), among others. Overall, there is a gap in the literature regarding measurable accountability (Yeigh et al., 2019). In the SLS, van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) defined accountability as holding followers accountable for their performance and giving them responsibility over their work, a meaning derived from deductive and inductive studies of available literature, with scale item Cronbach coefficients ranging from .57 to .85, thus confirming scale reliability.

Nehemiah has already been studied as an effective leader (Coggins, 2012; Patton, 2017) and even servant leader (Abbud, 2018; Maclariello, 2003). And because accountability and leadership are directly related (Riggi, 2017), a multifaceted look at leadership factors is necessary. Therefore, this study seeks to empirically explore Nehemiah as servant leader using a validated instrument, the SLS, to highlight how leading with accountability requires interdependence on a number of characteristics and behaviors and offer generalizable implications for modern leaders.

## NEHEMIAH

The Old Testament book of Nehemiah begins in the year 444 BC, in the city of Susa. The previous book,

Ezra, contains information regarding the first two returns from exile. Nehemiah could be read as a sequel to Ezra, as some scholars believe the books to have originally been one book with a shared argument (Campbell, 2017). Although the book of Nehemiah comes before Esther in the Old Testament canon, the events took place later historically. Esther took place between the first and second returns of the Jewish people, and Nehemiah covers the third return after being in exile in Babylon.

Nehemiah was a Jewish exile serving as a cupbearer to the king of Persia. He had received a message about the trouble the Jews were experiencing in Jerusalem. The crumbled wall in Jerusalem left those exiles susceptible to attacks. This vulnerability caused Nehemiah to feel very distressed, and so he mourned, fasted, and prayed. Nehemiah asked God to give him favor with King Artaxerxes so that he could help the exiles in Jerusalem, and, indeed, the king granted Nehemiah permission to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the city walls, as well as the opportunity for safe passage and supplies to rebuild. After spending a few days surveying the damage and receiving permission from officials, Nehemiah became governor, directed the division of labor, and delegated responsibility and authority while also managing opposition from the Ammonites and Horonites. Through all of the opposition, Nehemiah remained dedicated to the mission and vision, and faithful in prayer.

Under Nehemiah's leadership, the wall was rebuilt in just 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15), and even outsiders could clearly see that what was accomplished was because of God (Nehemiah 6:16). Patton (2017) identified Nehemiah's leadership strategies as pray, provide a vision, leverage power, use foresight, attend to followers' needs, understand the role of idealized influence, be adaptable, and persevere. The rebuilding of the crumbled wall was only a part of Nehemiah's concern as he set forth to also address spiritual disintegration (Campbell, 2017). The theme of restoration within the story of Nehemiah goes beyond the physical wall to include "full spiritual vitality to the people of God" (Campbell, 2017, p. 394).

## APPLICATION OF THE SLS TO NEHEMIAH

**Methods**

The authors of this article used the Servant Leadership Survey with permission, per van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), which states, "The Servant Leadership Survey may freely be used for scientific purposes" (p. 256).

Although there are at least 10 known measures of servant leadership (Coetzer et al., 2017), many of them are self-assessments. The SLS was selected both for its reliability and for its third-party observer format. An empirical Likert scale was utilized. However, the methodology employed was personal qualitative reflection and included interpretation measures on the part of the authors to determine implications for current leaders (Gay & Mills, 2019). Recent work on servant leadership suggested a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Eva et al., 2019). This study was not designed to obtain deductive results. Rather, reflective results were determined based on data discovered by applying an empirical scale (Morgan, 2018). Traditionally, qualitative methods of inquiry are based on participant observation or the examination of texts and typically only integrated with quantitative methods in regard to triangulation (Bryman, 1992). Increasingly, however, multimethod research is concerned with "increasing diversity of techniques centered in the conventional qualitative tradition [and] the growing number of interconnections between qualitative and quantitative research tools" (p. 780). Frels and Onwuegbuzie (2011) demonstrated how collecting data via sound instruments during the qualitative process enhances interpretations.

In order to observe the extent to which Nehemiah engaged in the behaviors related to the practices of servant leadership, the authors used the verbatim scriptural text evidence of the book of Nehemiah from the English Standard Version (ESV) Bible, replicating the methods outlined by Doyle and Swisher (2021). The ESV was selected because it is essentially a "literal translation" (Lutheran Study Bible, p. xv) as it is a word-for-word translation. However, the unit of analysis for this data was not focused on single words but rather on statements or phrases. The authors reviewed the scripture line by line. Anytime Nehemiah personally did or said something, that unit of observation was categorized under the corresponding item, where applicable. Reliability for this study was enhanced through inter-categorizer agreement due to the stability of responses when more than one reader analyzes data sets (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The authors independently categorized the textual data under the SLS items and then compared and discussed any differences in order to come to consensus. Using this qualitative agreement offered a suspension of judgment, which lessens the influence of researcher bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This means there was ultimately only one instrument scored (not two).

Following the categorization of data, the readers were then able to score the 30 items. All items were rated on a six-point Likert scale (1 = "Fully disagree" to 6 = "Fully agree"). The Likert rating was issued based on the actual number of textual support points for each item. For example, for item 24 ("My manager [Nehemiah] is prepared to express his feelings even if this might have undesirable consequences"), one point of textual support was Nehemiah 1:4 ("As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven). Likewise, verse 5:12 ("And I [Nehemiah] called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised") was categorized under item 14 ("I am held accountable for my performance by my manager [Nehemiah]"). The score for each dimension of the SLS was calculated by averaging the item scores.

## Results

A number following each dimension (see Table 1) of the Servant Leadership Survey is provided to show the averaged score. The four highest scoring dimensions for Nehemiah were stewardship (6), courage (6), authenticity (6), and accountability (5). The four lowest scoring dimensions were standing back (4), humility (2), empowerment (1), and forgiveness (0). Results will be further discussed for the purpose of modern leadership applications.

## DISCUSSION

In an age of accountability, scholars have determined that leadership approaches that are participative and trusting allow followers to perceive less threat to their sense of agency, thereby moving beyond mere compliance to the development of organizational capacity (Daly, 2009). Nehemiah initiated this trusting approach by returning to the people their vineyards, houses, and money that the previous officials had been exacting from them (Nehemiah 5:11) and subsequently assigning the trustworthy priests and Levites over their own duties and tasks (Nehemiah 13:30). Similarly, accountable leaders like Nehemiah are not passive, nor are they reactive. Accountable leaders are those focused on improvement, who operate with a strategic use of resources to build organizational capacity rather than incentive-based compliance (Elmore, 2008). For example, when Judah brought in the tithes of grain and olive oil, Nehemiah placed Shelemiah and Zako in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan responsible for distributing supplies to fellow Levites (Nehemiah 13:13). By holding followers accountable and role-modeling expected behaviors, leaders influence their followers to improve their own judgment (Steinbauer et al., 2014). "Accountable leadership indicates willingness and ability to justify one's beliefs, feelings and actions to others in line with implicit or explicit expectation" (Riggi, 2017, p. 644).

Leadership theories and behaviors are often discussed in terms of social constructs. Bandura (1977) discussed the social implications of role modeling as useful for increasing ethical behavior in organizations. Brown and Treviño (2014) suggested that ethical role models are the antecedent for ethical leadership. The authors further mentioned that popular opinion reflects a mindset toward ethical leadership in the workplace as weak, and they described this stance as cynical. Quite on the contrary, Nehemiah showed great strength in his efforts to lead the people in a common goal. A broad range of stakeholders can be positively impacted by the role modeling aspects associated with servant leadership (Bao et al., 2018). Nehemiah's willingness to model prayer, obedience, work ethic, and courage impacted a nation. A leader, if lso seen as a role model, can truly influence and guide the behaviors of her followers or employees (Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2020).

It is evident among the results that accountability does not stand alone. In order to hold others accountable, one must overcome any risk in upholding one's moral principles. Sekerka and Bagozzi (2007) defined courage as "the ability to use inner principles to do what is good for others, regardless of threat to self, as a matter of practice" (p. 135). Courage is a crucial factor in determining whether leaders will act in line with their beliefs (Hannah et al., 2011). Indeed, Nehemiah took many risks, one of which was to get up in the middle of the night to inspect the walls of Jerusalem, telling no one what "God had put into [his] heart to do for Jerusalem" (Nehemiah 2:13). Moreover, in leadership studies, authentic leadership has been found to be a critical factor in enhancing follower moral courage, and courage in the leader is important for prompting those exemplary actions in followers (Hannah et al., 2011). It makes sense, then, that Nehemiah scored so high in both courage and authenticity. Nehemiah's people followed his lead as they all labored on the wall together during the day and protected the wall together at night (Nehemiah 4:23). This study affirms the linkages between authentic leadership and follower behaviors as well as the importance of leaders role-modeling what they expect to see in their followers.

In addition to prosocial behaviors like authenticity and courage, Nehemiah scored highest in stewardship. Distinct from altruism, stewardship is "the extent to which an individual willingly subjugates his or her personal interests to act in protection of others' long-term welfare" (Hernandez, 2012, p. 174). Moreover, stewardship has been defined as the process to take accountability for the common good of a society (Coetzer et al., 2017). Nehemiah's behaviors affirm research that indicates stewardship to be both cognitive and affective. That is, Nehemiah is conceptually cognizant that he has a social responsibility as governor, yet it is his love for God and the people of Israel that prompts his prosocial actions. For example, when Nehemiah was appointed as governor, he did not place heavy financial burdens on the people to keep as his own daily ration as the former governors did because of his fear of God (Nehemiah 5:15). Instead, the daily portion was set aside for the musicians, gatekeepers, and Levites (Nehemiah 12:47).

This discussion would not be complete without mentioning Nehemiah's areas of weakness on the SLS. Some of these dimensions are explicated within the following section on limitations and future directions. However, it may also be noted that Nehemiah served concurrently with Ezra, a scribe and Levite priest. In the rebuilding of Israel both physically and spiritually, Nehemiah focused on social responsibility while Ezra focused on spiritual responsibility. While the SLS was not completed for Ezra, anecdotally it is apparent that he fulfilled some of the dimensions on the SLS where Nehemiah was lacking. For example, though Nehemiah scored minimally on "empowerment," Ezra raised up leaders, priests, Levites, and servants, empowering them to journey to Jerusalem and guard the temple donations along the way (Ezra 8). Though Ezra and Nehemiah differed in their approaches to leadership, both were effective (Coggins, 2012). This relationship closely follows the key characteristics of shared leadership, in which there exists an emergent lateral leadership influence with dispersed roles or functions of leadership that align with each leader's skills or expertise (Zhu et al., 2018). Even this shared approach to leadership lends itself to holding one another accountable for leadership responsibilities.

Ultimately, it is clear that in order to be a successful servant leader, there must be accountability. One aspect that makes servant leadership distinct from other styles of leadership is the sense of moral or social responsibility toward not only an organization but to all its stakeholders, including subordinates (Lee et al., 2020). A systematic review of the literature on servant leadership identified accountability as not only a characteristic of servant leadership but a function of continuous monitoring and improvement in servant leadership (Coetzer et al., 2017). By purifying the priests and Levites, assigning them duties, and making provisions for contributions (Nehemiah 13:30-31), Nehemiah's actions worked for the good of both Israel at large as well as his subordinates individually. Taking actions that contribute to the good of others is positively associated with higher levels of human flourishing, including physical and mental well-being (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2021a).

## APPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

Findings affirmed that accountability is what Evans (2021) labeled a "constellation of virtues" (p. 321) with a forward direction. It is evident that leading with accountability inherently requires interdependence with other virtues or characteristics and with other people. Evans (2021) suggested the implications of accountability are not necessarily intended to produce or advance academic theories or professional outcomes, but to encourage personal ethical development. As both Evans (2021) and the study of Nehemiah highlighted, this includes satisfying the expectations of those to whom one is accountable or improving oneself as a result of that relationship. This is what Weziak-Bialowolska et al. (2021a) *à la* VanderWeele et al.'s oeuvre (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; VanderWeele et al., 2020; Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2021b) would call human flourishing. Nehemiah's leadership corroborated this as he sought the common good for his people as a response to his fear of the Lord and his delighting in God's commandments. As Maclariello (2003) succinctly summarized, "The story of Nehemiah gives us an extraordinary example of a servant leader motivated and acting for God's ends: (1) God's glory and (2) the good of those served" (p. 406). In Nehemiah's accountability to God and his reciprocal accountability with the people, the people of Israel flourished.

For leaders today, that forward movement derived from accountable relationships leading to human flourishing may be the key takeaway from Nehemiah. Nehemiah's behaviors, as studied through the SLS, apply to modern leadership practice and leaders could benefit from exhibiting the behaviors shown in Table 2.

The behaviors shown in Table 2 may manifest in the following ways.

## Table 2: Nehemiah's Leadership Lessons

|  | Leadership Behaviors |
| --- | --- |
| Behavior 1 | Model expectations |
| Behavior 2 | Take risks that align with values |
| Behavior 3 | Consider the common good over individual or personal good |
| Behavior 4 | Embrace shared or lateral leadership through the complementary role of others |

### Role-Modeling

For leaders who serve in the workplace, taking the time to model what is expected can have a far greater impact than simply giving directions or expecting compliance. Thus, modeling is a form of service. Decuypere and Schaufeli (2020) shared three specific ways for leaders to assume the stance of role model in the workplace: 1) showcase vigor as a behavior to be emulated, 2) display a level of absorption in the tasks at hand, and 3) show the same level of dedication expected of subordinates. Nehemiah made ethics part of his leadership style, but he did not stop there. He modeled ethical behavior for the people. Brown and Treviño (2014) would suggest that leaders who desire organizational members to behave ethically and who embrace an ethical agenda are more likely to achieve these goals if they are role models for that which is considered highly ethical behavior.

### Risk-Taking

Risk-taking is not necessarily a behavior that always results in positive action, but when it aligns with an ethical agenda, it can be a leadership asset. Yasir and Mohamad (2016) described an ethical leader as one willing to take on a level of personal risk to accomplish a mission or vision. The authors further asserted that the opposite approach, avoiding personal risk, can be a pitfall that leads to unethical behavior. Nehemiah's leadership journey began with accepting the personal level of risk-taking associated with approaching the king about safe passage back to his people and, during his time as governor of the land, his willingness to accept personal risk allowed him many opportunities to serve the nation. Moral and ethical forms of leadership have seen a recent surge (Lemoine et al., 2019). Contemporary leaders committed to servant and ethical leadership models should understand, accept, and communicate full buy-in even to the point of personal risk. When the values of an organization have been clearly established, a servant leader must be willing to take personal risk and behave accordingly.

### The Common Good

Servant leadership strategies can lead to favorable outcomes for individuals as well as teams or organizations (Coetzer et al., 2017), but an implication for contemporary leaders is to focus first on the common good over or before individual opportunity. Patton (2017) identified one of Nehemiah's leadership strategies as attending to followers' needs. Abbud (2018) asserted the importance of motivating followers by communicating an interest in that which is best for them. This can be extended to include interest in that which is best for the organization. There is an increasing interest in Christian ethics in both business and management fields (Melé & Fontrodona, 2017). However, the authors called for more investigation into ways Christian principles and biblical values can be integrated and how these can affect performance. Based on the tenets of servant leadership, as well as Nehemiah's example, one way to do this would be to willingly apply the biblical directive to put others before oneself (Matthew 7:12). In organizational language, this could include putting the good of the group before personal gain. Followers, team members, and subordinates "can be inspired by a leader who advocates the highest common good for all and is motivated to contribute to that common good" (Lemoine et al., 2019, p. 177).

### Shared Leadership

According to Smith and Wolverton's (2010) higher education leadership competencies scale, a behavioral component to leadership is a willingness to focus on other members of the organization whose set of skills and abilities can help contribute to success. In other words, leadership should not be about one person's abilities, skill set, knowledge, or resources. Successful leaders surround themselves with other successful leaders and treat the leadership process as a lateral and shared responsibility. Leadership is not one-size-fits-all (Coggins, 2012). Nehemiah understood that his role as governor

had boundaries. Nehemiah served as the primary political leader while Ezra served as the spiritual leader and their shared goals were to restore and rebuild (Abbud, 2018). Practitioners today will find success in the four leadership practices gleaned from Nehemiah: modeling expectations, taking risks that align with personal values, considering the common good over individual or personal good, and embracing shared or lateral leadership through the complementary role of other leaders.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The limitations of this study include the definitions by which each variable of the SLS are described. For example, while Nehemiah exhibited behaviors of what many Christians might consider forgiveness, they did not align with the questions on the scale, which were focused on criticizing or maintaining a hard attitude toward others. This is in line with previous studies that had low factor loadings on this dimension, possibly due to the negative formulation of the items (Kobayashi et al., 2020), and future research may want to reformulate these items positively. Likewise, the humility scale focused on learning from criticism, whereas perhaps a more applicable construct of humility is defined simply as "a personal orientation founded on a willingness to see the self accurately" (Morris et al., 2005, p. 1331). Had the questions been oriented around the way Nehemiah viewed himself, he may have scored higher on humility given his consistent posture of prayer and seeking the will of God. In perhaps the most critical limitation for this particular study, accountability focused solely on holding *others* accountable, without the added component of *oneself* being held accountable by others, yet it is important to distinguish between these two concepts of accountability (Bovens, 2010). Though Nehemiah appears to have held himself accountable to God, the king, and to his followers, this was not measured on the SLS. Future research may seek to develop broader constructs of accountability, humility, and forgiveness in measuring servant leadership. While this study did not directly take into account the cultural context of the post-exilic Jews, servant leadership has been found to be associated with cultural context (Kobayashi et al., 2020), and future researchers may want to investigate that impact accordingly.

Because this study was limited by only one response to the instrument, another suggestion for future research is that a larger scale replication study be conducted on Nehemiah using the conceptual framework of servant leadership and measured using the SLS in its current state as a validated instrument that has been shown to bring about reliable results. Similarly, an additional proposed research study would be to replicate this study's methods but focus on a different biblical or historical figure, such as Ezra. The SLS contains eight distinct dimensions, making it possible to hone in on one dimension and build a more narrowed study based solely on one rather than all dimensions of the survey. Researchers may also choose to investigate Nehemiah using a framework other than servant leadership or go beyond leadership and investigate different attributes or phenomena.

## CONCLUSION

Accountable leadership is an important pursuit in an era of diminishing virtues. The quest for relevant and effective leadership practices was enhanced by intentional observation of ancient leadership behavior through the methodical study of the book of Nehemiah. Results were based on the application of an empirical scale, the Servant Leadership Survey, and a methodological approach of personal qualitative reflection. With the intent to discover implications for modern-day leaders, the behaviors of Nehemiah, a biblical prophet whose words and actions brought about the common good in an exiled landscape, were studied. The servant leadership framework was applied to generate discussion and practical implications for leaders, including four effective leadership practices that served the context well. As leaders today embrace what it means to lead with accountability, examples from the past can be studied using social science methods to bring about results focused on qualities and practices that can lead to human flourishing. Nehemiah was an authentic leader who stewarded resources for the common good and his behaviors translate into insightful leadership practices for current leaders to incorporate.

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