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Developing oneself to serve others? Servant leadership practices of mindfulness-trained leaders

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ABSTRACT

To advance the research on servant leadership development, we explore if and how mindfulness training may help develop servant leadership behaviors. We present findings of a pre-intervention inquiry and post-intervention interviews with 62 leaders who participated in an eight-week-long mindfulness intervention. We detect three mechanisms that explicate how mindfulness-trained leaders engage in servant leadership to benefit themselves, their followers, and the work community: 1) Developing oneself as a servant leader (self-awareness and self-care), 2) Serving the follower (relationship building, follower development and follower well-being), and 3) Serving the team (team culture). In doing so, this study strengthens the theoretical bridge between leader mindfulness and servant leadership by demonstrating how these literatures can build upon each other and how mindfulness interventions can be used to develop servant leaders from both a leader development (intra-individual) and a leadership development (inter-individual) lens.

1. Introduction

Don't treat others the way you want to be treated. Rather how they want to be treated.
—Anonymous leader mindfulness intervention participant

The leader's other-orientation, a willingness to put their own needs aside for the benefit of others, is at the heart of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Lemoine et al., in press). This other-orientation is explicit in the definition of servant leadership as an "other-oriented approach to leadership manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community" (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114). Servant leadership is now established as a major leadership approach in the leadership literature (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023) and corporate practice (Hartnell et al., 2016) due to its profound effects on followers, organizations, and communities (Eva et al., 2019; Neubert et al., 2022; Lemoine et al., in press). While numerous studies point to the attitudinal, behavioral and performance benefits of servant leadership (Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020), how to develop other-orientation within leaders that the servant leadership literature argues for continues to be under-theorized and under-researched (Lohrey, 2016; Meuser & Smallfield, 2023). Specifically, while the nascent theorizing on developing servant leaders argues that development needs to be targeted at both the leader themselves (i.e., such as their other-orientation and self-awareness) and the leader's skills (i.e., such as giving feedback, and empowering others; Sendjaya, 2015), the research has focused almost exclusively on skill development (e.g., Lemoine et al., 2021; Meuser & Smallfield, 2023). To develop servant leaders, both forms of development are required, as the leader's other-orientation underpins the motivation to and execution of servant leader skills and behaviors (Lemoine et al., in press). However, researchers posit that genuine other-orientation is difficult to develop through traditional leadership skill development (Pircher Verdorfer, 2016).

To address the concern of developing other-orientation in leaders, we look to the field of mindfulness, i.e., "the awareness that arises through intentionally attending in an open, caring, and discerning way"

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(Shapiro & Carlson, 2017, p. 8). The value of mindfulness and mindfulness-based interventions or training programs[1] for professional development is a rapidly growing topic of interest in management and organization studies (e.g., Urrila & Mäkelä, 2022; Xie et al., 2022; Yela Aránega et al., 2020; for reviews see Eby et al., 2019; Good et al., 2016; Stuart-Edwards et al., 2023; Urrila, 2022). On an individual level, engaging in mindfulness cultivates awareness in all aspects of daily living and oneself (one's thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviors; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). When viewed as an interpersonal phenomenon that takes place in interactions, mindfulness training and practice encourage participants to become aware of one's interpersonal relationships (Shapiro & Carlson, 2017; Skoranski et al., 2019), such as the relationship between leaders and followers. Specifically, in a comprehensive review, Urrila (2022) revealed that leaders' engagement in mindfulness interventions can lead to various developmental outcomes connected to their well-being, work productivity, personal growth and relationships. These outcomes encompass heightened levels of self- and social awareness, enhanced perspective-taking and empathic concern, and a deeper understanding of social and contextual dynamics.

Thus, mindfulness interventions might be the missing link to develop other-orientation in leaders. An exploration of how training leaders in mindfulness could support the development of servant leadership has been encouraged by several authors (e.g., Pircher Verdorfer, 2016; Reb et al., 2015) due to the linkages between the skills learned in mindfulness interventions and the skills required for servant leadership (e.g., Reb et al., 2015). Specifically, mindfulness practice raises awareness and enhances individuals' objectivity toward their own experience, fostering the capacity to take another('s) perspective, which is crucial for the development of servant leaders (Pircher Verdorfer, 2016; Reb et al., 2015; Sendjaya, 2015; Shapiro et al., 2006). Through examining how other-orientation can be developed through mindfulness interventions, we join the growing chorus of scholars arguing to move beyond skill development for servant leaders and incorporate holistic ways of developing other-orientation. For example, Hunter et al. (2013) propose strategies such as coaching to enhance leaders' overall other-orientation and elevate their level of care and concern for their team members. Going further, Bragger et al. (2021) argue that addressing development across multiple domains of human functioning (rather than just skills) – spiritual, cognitive, social, emotional, moral – is needed to facilitate a servant-oriented leadership style and further the leader's ability to serve.

It is noteworthy that mindfulness interventions do not rely on the explicit top-down acquisition of skills through traditional classroom instruction commonly seen in previously reported servant leadership development (e.g., Eva & Sendjaya, 2013). Rather, with a strong practice-base as its key distinguishing feature, mindfulness interventions rely on an implicit bottom-up learning approach which typically combines classroom instruction and independent, experiential type of practice and reflection drawing from real-life experiences (Gilbert et al., 2018; Reb et al., 2015). Hence, we posit that a holistic method such as a mindfulness intervention, which is based on ongoing voluntary self-development, might provide a long-lasting way to develop leaders' other-orientation which is central to being or becoming a servant leader.

To examine this proposition, we sought to qualitatively explore if and how a mindfulness intervention may help develop servant leaders. This study draws from the experiences of 62 organizational leaders who participated in an eight-week-long mindfulness intervention. The material collected at two-time points covers pre-intervention tasks and post-intervention interviews. By using a qualitative design, we were able to capture the leaders' firsthand experiences with mindfulness interventions and how they perceive mindfulness training to influence their leadership, detecting meaningful themes and patterns in the collected materials (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative research enables a deeper, open exploration of the mechanisms involved as the participants engage with the intervention (Warren et al., 2020), in contrast to the typical focus on quantitatively measuring predetermined outcomes in mindfulness research (Choi & Leroy, 2015; Reina et al., 2023).

Our pre-intervention findings revealed that while many leaders expressed a willingness to be other-oriented in their leadership, they struggled to implement this type of leadership, as they did not have effective strategies and tools to address demanding workloads, difficult relationships with followers, and challenges with team functioning. The post-intervention findings revealed three mechanisms that explain how leaders apply mindfulness learning in their day-to-day leadership work to benefit themselves, their followers, and the work community and directly address the pre-intervention challenges. First, how to develop themselves as a servant leader (i.e., self-awareness and self-care); Second, providing space and tools to serve their followers (i.e., developing relationships, follower development and well-being). Third, building a workplace culture to serve the team (i.e., team culture). Integrating the pre- and post-intervention themes, we provide a conceptual framework (see Fig. 2) that illustrates how servant leadership is developed through voluntarily and actively engaging with a mindfulness intervention, instruction, and mindfulness practices, and integrating those learnings and practices into day-to-day leadership behaviors, to develop their leadership, serve their followers, and their team. In doing so, this study goes beyond investigating whether mindfulness training leads to servant leadership, rather it advances the understanding of how mindfulness training supports those who genuinely want to demonstrate self-awareness, ethical mindset, selflessness, and motivation to serve and support others, amidst the recognized challenges in the leadership environment.

Our study contributes to the literature on mindfulness and leadership development in four ways. First, we change the focus of servant leadership development to address the missing component of developing an other-orientation, through the practice of mindfulness, as we identify mechanisms that show how leaders trained in mindfulness actively engage in servant leadership to benefit themselves, their followers, and the work community, their team. In doing so, we advance the conversation on servant leadership development (e.g., Lemoine et al., 2021; Sendjaya, 2015) to include the development of the motivations and resources of the leader, not just their leadership skills (see Fig. 2). Second, we advance the mindfulness literature (Reb & Atkins, 2015; Urrila, 2022) by demonstrating that mindfulness interventions can be used to develop specific approaches to leadership, albeit without traditional leadership training, as it provides leaders the intra-individual development and helps them improve their inter-individual dynamics which has downstream effects on their followers. Third, we strengthen the theoretical bridge between leader mindfulness and servant leadership by demonstrating how these literatures can build upon each other and how mindfulness interventions can be used to develop servant leaders (Reb et al., 2015) from both a leader development (intra-individual) and a leadership development lens (inter-individual; Badham & King, 2021; Day, 2000; Day et al., 2021). Fourth, we advance the leadership development literature by demonstrating that mindfulness training is an ongoing way to develop individuals' leadership capacities through continuous self-reflection and self-discovery, even after they have left the training.

[1] We distinguish between 'mindfulness' as an intra-individual psychological capacity (trait- or state-like quality) and as an intentional activity (mindfulness practice, mindfulness intervention) to induce a mindful mental state (Eby et al., 2019; Reb et al., 2015), the latter being the focus of this article. Specifically, mindfulness training is "a planned intervention offered to employees over some period of time (several hours to months) that is designed to teach mindfulness skills" and that incorporates a variety of practices (Eby et al., 2019, p. 157).

2. Literature review

2.1. Servant leadership and leader development

The concept of servant leadership emerged from practitioner Robert K. Greenleaf (1970, 1977), who argued that the most effective leaders he witnessed during his career as the Director for Management Research at AT&T were those who were other-oriented, who served their followers with empathy, and persuaded others, rather than coerced them. He coined the term 'servant leadership' to describe leaders who led in this style. Servant leadership entered academic practice with Jill Graham's (1991) influential piece on how there is a moral crisis in leadership and that servant leadership offers a solution. Academic-based models of servant leadership have been refined by several scholars, including teams led by Liden (2008), Sendjaya (2008) and van Dierendonck (2011), who identified a variety of specific behaviors that are indicative of servant leaders, including putting followers first, acting with morality, and being authentic. These models have spurred numerous reviews (e.g., Eva et al., 2019; Lemoine et al., 2019), *meta*-analyses (e.g., Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020), and hundreds of primary studies (e.g., Christensen-Salem et al., 2021; Si et al., 2023; Zarei et al., 2022) demonstrating the benefits servant leadership has for employees, the organization, the community, and the leader themselves.

Across the literature, the key differentiator of servant leadership from other leadership approaches is predominantly its other-orientation (van Dierendonck, 2011), which is manifested by being a steward of their employees, that is, being trusted with followers' well-being and growth (Lemoine et al., 2019). Servant leaders build strong, mutual relationships with each follower within their team, which are marked by shared values, commitment, mutual trust, and concern for the welfare of the other (Sendjaya et al., 2008). To build these relationships, the leader needs to have a strong sense of who they are and how they come to leadership to serve. As put by Greenleaf (1977), one first has an internal calling to serve, and then they come to lead.

The positive impact of servant leadership, beyond performance and satisfaction (for work on these variables, see Hoch et al., 2018 for a *meta*-analysis), can be found across individual followers, the team, and the leader themselves. At an individual (or dyadic) level, servant leaders have been reported to have a positive impact on followers' career development (Wang et al., 2019), emotional development (Lu et al., 2019), resilience (Ahmad et al., 2021), and wellbeing (Lohrey, 2016). At a team level, servant leaders foster a cooperative (Yang et al., 2018), service-focused (Hunter et al., 2013), and trusting environment (Ling et al., 2017) which results in a psychologically safe workplace (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Research exploring the impact of engaging in servant leadership on the leader themselves is a little sparser (Eva et al., 2019), and has predominantly focused on the negative effects on the leader, such as emotional exhaustion (Zheng et al., 2024) and state depletion (for those leaders low in perspective taking; Liao et al., 2021). These results are based on the theorizing that engaging in acts of service depletes the leader. However, more positively, recent evidence from Li et al. (2023) found that engaging in servant leadership helps address leaders' psychological needs satisfaction, especially when they have support from their supervisors.

However positive servant leadership sounds, two overarching criticisms have hindered its advancement in the literature. The first is the overt positivity of this leadership approach, among others, like authentic and transformational, with scholars questioning if people can engage in the multitude of servant behaviors mentioned in the literature (Collinson & Tourish, 2015) and have the motivation to continuously put followers first (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). The second is that while authors have posited that servant leadership development is required in organizations (e.g., Christensen-Salem et al., 2021; Hunter et al., 2013), empirical examples examining how to develop servant leaders are rare (Lohrey, 2016). Our study seeks to address these criticisms by demonstrating which servant leadership behaviors can be developed through a mindfulness intervention to both protect the leader's wellbeing and develop the other-orientation required to serve their followers. To explore the different components of servant leadership development, we draw on the leadership development literature.

The leadership development literature distinguishes two forms of development (Day, 2000). The aim of *leadership* development is to expand the collective capacity (leadership processes and social structures) to achieve effective leadership, while *leader* development focuses on developing the individual leader (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Day et al., 2021). Day and Dragoni (2015) argue that there are four key proximal developmental indicators to develop leaders—leadership self-efficacy, leader identity, self-awareness, and leadership knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs). Of these four, the development of self-awareness has become a cornerstone in leader development research and practice as self-awareness is an essential precursor to effective leadership (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Newstead et al., in press; Sturm et al., 2014). Despite this, the existing servant leadership literature has tended to focus solely on KSA development (e.g., Eva & Sendjaya, 2013; Lemoine et al., 2021; Meuser & Smallfield, 2023). Given that servant leadership emphasis on leader's selflessness, ethical mindset, and motivation to serve and support others, is grounded in their deep self-awareness (Madison et al., 2023; Sendjaya, 2015; van Dierendonck, 2011), effectively developing servant leaders would encompass both intrapersonal *leader* development (self-awareness and discovering a motivation to serve/be other-oriented) and interpersonal *leadership* development (learning how to serve followers and the community; Bragger et al., 2021).

To do so, the leader and leadership development literature suggests that the most effective development interventions may be those that are practice-based (Lacerenza et al., 2017), focused on the enhancement of holistic functioning (Bragger et al., 2021; Day et al., 2014), and aligned with adult development (Day et al., 2014; Riggio & Mumford, 2011). To contribute to their development, leaders must continuously engage in self-development behaviors to make sense of their experiences and build self- and social awareness (Day et al., 2021; Heslin & Keating, 2017; Nesbit, 2012; Reichard & Johnson, 2011). Positive transformation of teams, organizations and societies can occur through the development of individual-level awareness of one's values, motivations, and goals (Neal, 2018). Research acknowledges that awareness has both conscious and unconscious levels, and that the individual may be able to bring what they are unaware of to their conscious awareness by processing the goings-on of one's mind and body (Carden et al., 2021). Based on existing knowledge, the development of self-awareness and social awareness appears to be an ongoing journey throughout one's life, evolving through a process of continual growth and encompassing practices that stimulate cognitive, emotional, and sensory functions, fostering introspection (Carden et al., 2021). As servant leadership is essentially "a series of virtuous, other-centered behaviors that one can consistently strive to enhance" (Bragger et al., 2021, p. 12), a holistic, practice-oriented approach may be needed to develop servant leaders.

2.2. Mindfulness for leaders: The interpersonal view

Mindfulness is defined as a state of attention to and awareness of events and experiences in the present moment (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). 'Being present' may be understood as open attention and mindful awareness that entails both directly experiencing whatever arises to the attention of the mind (experiencing self), together with the attitude of minimizing any interpretations and emotional reactivity (observing self; Parker et al., 2015). Mindfulness is also a skill that can be trained. Shapiro et al. (2018, p. 1694) describe practicing 'mindful awareness' as a way of (intentionally) relating to one's experience as it is in each moment in an "open, kind, and receptive manner". This kind of experience is direct and promotes non-judgmentality, allowing a shift in perspective also known as 'reperceiving', "the hallmark of mindfulness practice" and a key mechanism bringing about positive outcomes of mindfulness (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 378).

Practicing mindfulness involves contemplation directed towards internal and external phenomena (meditation), reflexive monitoring of one's mental states and actions (introspection), and making purposeful choices intended to serve oneself and others (ethical conduct; Purser & Milillo, 2015). Numerous practice-based mindfulness interventions have been designed for clinical and non-clinical audiences, including Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1982), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT; Segal et al., 2002), Health Enhancement Program (HEP; Hassed et al., 2009), and Search Inside Yourself (SIY; Caporale-Berkowitz et al., 2021). Mindfulness interventions typically contain developmentally oriented activities built around the concept of mindfulness, including psychoeducational content, opportunity for self-reflection, and meditation and awareness practices, which may take the form of formal practice (dedicated time for practice) or informal practice, a mindful 'way of being' accessible at any moment that occurs in the context of normal daily routines (Brendel et al., 2016; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Reina et al., 2023).

Current research conceptualizes mindfulness as an interpersonal phenomenon that takes place in interactions and social processes. Research from different contexts provides an understanding of mindfulness as an *inter-individual* phenomenon through references to *interpersonal* mindfulness (e.g., Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2022; Reina et al., 2023), *relational* mindfulness (e.g., Vich et al., 2020), and *social* mindfulness (e.g., Fazia et al., 2020). While being mindful and practicing mindfulness can benefit an individual's health, well-being, and functioning, there is growing evidence of how it can benefit an individual's relationships with others (Donald et al., 2019; Skoranski et al., 2019). Mindfulness literature has demonstrable evidence that mindfulness training and practice encourages participants to engage in a holistic practice of paying attention with a caring intention to become aware of oneself *and* one's interpersonal relationships (Shapiro & Carlson, 2017; Skoranski et al., 2019). In the interpersonal context, mindful awareness enables focusing on the other person with an attitude of kindness, empathy, and compassion (Parker et al., 2015). Intriguingly, regulation of personal distress enhanced by mindfulness and mindfulness practice has been found to determine how altruistically or kindly people respond to others (similar to an other-orientation; Donald et al., 2019; Skoranski et al., 2019). Prosocial behaviors, such as helping, resulting from mindfulness practice foster cooperation and cohesion among groups (Donald et al., 2019).

In the work context, the focus of mindfulness practice has shifted from the individual good to the collective good, drawing inspiration from the interpersonal and collective conceptualizations of mindfulness (e.g., Badham & King, 2021; Skoranski et al., 2019). A review by Good et al. (2016) indicates that mindfulness practice may improve interpersonal behavior, team functioning, the quality of dyadic and workgroup relationships, attentional and emotional processes, listening, collaboration and respect, and conflict management. While providing mindfulness training to masses of employees is often not an option, nor the only way to promote mindfulness in organizations, mindfulness training may be offered for leaders, managers, and supervisors in the hope that their learnings will 'spill over' and improve their critical leadership capabilities and have beneficial organizational and team level effects (Harvey & Kudesia, 2023; Hülsheger, 2015).

Despite the promise of 'spill over' to other people in the organization, research on leaders' mindfulness interventions, however, most typically focuses on measuring well-being-related outcomes, like stress reduction for the leader (e.g., Crivelli et al., 2019; for a review see Urrila, 2022). This has brought about criticism towards the instrumental use of mindfulness in organizations as an individually-focused self-help technique (e.g., Purser & Milillo, 2015). To be an effective leader, it is critical to learn to be present and aware in social interactions with followers (Reb et al., 2014). Mindfulness training can help leaders enhance their self- and social awareness which build their social skills and abilities relevant for building relationships, managing communication and conflict, and developing others (Urrila & Mäkelä, 2022). Concomitantly, approaches that are more focused on mindful reflection, inner growth, ethical consideration and values-based leadership, interdependence and purposeful collaborative action are gaining ground, putting less emphasis on the self-centered concerns of individuals (Badham & King, 2021). As Reb et al. (2014, p. 43) put it, "leaders who are fully present when interacting with the subordinates may derive a better understanding of their employees' needs which may allow them to more effectively support employees", suggesting that the leader's enhanced awareness and attention in the interpersonal context may result in other-oriented leadership behavior.

Examining mindfulness in relation to specific leadership approaches and behaviors, leader trait mindfulness (as opposed to mindfulness interventions) has been reported to predict servant leadership behaviors, namely humility, standing back, and authenticity as perceived by followers (Pircher Verdorfer, 2016). The authors suggest that similarly, servant leadership could be developed through mindfulness interventions (Pircher Verdorfer, 2016). Quantitative studies on mindfulness interventions have focused on measuring changes in leadership behaviors. For instance, mindfulness interventions have been shown to support transformational leadership behavior, reduce destructive leadership (Lange & Rowold, 2019), and support authentic leadership development (Nübold et al., 2019). Qualitative explorations indicate that mindfulness practice in the leadership context could benefit leadership relationships (e.g., Goldman-Schuyler et al., 2017; Urrila & Mäkelä, 2022). Existing research thus suggests that mindfulness-based interventions and training programs could support the development of positive leadership behaviors, such as servant leadership, that foster positive leadership relationships and could potentially lead to desirable outcomes (Pircher Verdorfer, 2016). To our knowledge, however, no other empirical study to date has qualitatively studied leaders' experiences of a mindfulness intervention in connection to a specific relational or other-oriented leadership approach, such as servant leadership. Whether leader other-orientation and servant leadership could develop through mindfulness training and practice without an explicit intention for such impact is yet to be explored (Reb et al., 2015).

2.3. Supporting the development of servant leaders through mindfulness interventions

Drawing the two literatures together, as introduced earlier, a missing component to the servant leadership literature is how *leader* development occurs for servant leadership, which is discovering a motivation to serve (i.e., being other-oriented). Rather, most of the work on servant leadership development either focuses on a particular program with a limited description on how servant leadership is developed (e.g., Marks, 2015), particular skill sets that servant leaders should have in their toolkits (e.g., Eva & Sendjaya, 2013), or the different stakeholder groups servant leaders can serve (e.g., Lemoine et al., 2021; Meuser & Smallfield, 2023). To address the development of other-orientation (Lemoine et al., in press) and to protect against fatigue by regularly engaging in servant leadership behavior (Liao et al., 2021), we suggest that mindfulness training could be an important approach. Mindfulness interventions represent leader development efforts that involve the holistic development of the physiological, cognitive and attentional, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual qualities of an individual in relationship to the self and others (Kristeller, 2004), similarly Bragger et al. (2021) bring forth that leader development across the cognitive, emotional, spiritual, social, and moral domains can support servant leadership orientation.

An inherent link between mindfulness and servant leadership has been suggested, as mindfulness practice seems to theoretically enhance the motivation and ability to engage in servant leadership (Pircher Verdorfer, 2016; Reb et al., 2015; Roche et al., 2020; Urrila, 2022). Mindfulness practice can raise awareness and increase the human capacity for objectivity about one's experience, which enables taking another('s) perspective (Shapiro et al., 2006), which is required in

servant leadership (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Mindfulness may thus be viewed as a value-based developmental practice and interpersonal phenomenon that is cultivated in relationships (e.g., King & Badham, 2019; for reviews see Donald et al., 2019; Skoranski et al., 2019), such as between servant leaders and followers. Like mindfulness, servant leadership has been described as a 'way of being' and a transformational approach to life and work (SanFacon & Spears, 2008), and mindfulness-based development aligns with continuous human development and may thus support leaders in the continuous human developmental process required for servant leadership (Phipps, 2010).

Mindfulness practice pushes past skills-based training, where the merits of serving others or how to serve others might be discussed. Rather, mindfulness training invites participants to engage in regular formal and informal practice, and thoughtful re-evaluation of one's thoughts and actions (Kabat-Zinn, 2011; Reb et al., 2015). This approach to internal development is strongly aligned with the notion of leader self-awareness (e.g., Chon & Sitkin, 2021). For servant leadership development, leaders can use mindfulness practice as a way to engage in a self-awareness process to find the connections between their personal, social, and leader identities (Bragger et al. 2021; Sendjaya, 2015). In that way, they are not explicitly instructed on becoming servant leaders or being taught how to incorporate servant leader behaviors into their leadership toolkit (Reb et al., 2015). Instead, mindfulness learning and practice facilitates the natural development of their desire for other-oriented behavior (Pircher Verdorfer, 2016). Further, rather than being a one-off skill development, mindfulness training is ongoing self-development that can support the development or reinforcement of a leader's self-awareness (Urrila & Mäkelä, 2022). The continuous leader self-development that mindfulness interventions offer allows leaders to engage in the behaviors that are required to mature as a leader, make sense of their experiences, and build self- and social awareness (Day et al., 2021; Heslin & Keating, 2017; Reichard & Johnson, 2011). Thus, to address the shortcomings in servant leadership development we have outlined, we investigate the potential role of mindfulness interventions for building leaders' capacity for servant leadership.

3. Methods

While the research on the consequences of servant leadership is a mature field, how servant leaders are developed is still nascent and lacks theoretical frameworks to examine this process (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2014a). Nascent areas of study and their subsequent research questions are conducive to qualitative research designs that do not have established theories to construct hypotheses, and instead require open-ended questions to "ensure researchers identify and investigate key variables over the course of the study" (Edmondson & McManus, 2007, p. 1162). Qualitative studies in the servant leadership field are few and far between and needed for the continued growth of the field (Eva et al., 2019). Similarly, while the norm in mindfulness research has been centered on quantitatively measuring pre-defined outcome variables, it is likely that mindfulness interventions and mindfulness practice involve various aspects and processes which cannot be predetermined or captured by statistical survey studies (Choi & Leroy, 2015; Karjalainen et al., 2021). Overall, qualitative analysis is suitable for business research when the objective involves obtaining a holistic understanding of the issues studied (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). We have chosen qualitative research due to our goal of capturing leaders' firsthand experiences with mindfulness interventions, particularly focusing on understanding their motivations, and intentions, and to detect meaningful themes and patterns in the collected materials (Patton, 2014; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014).

We examined leaders' experiences of an eight-week-long mindfulness intervention with a qualitative research design that allowed for an open exploration of the mechanisms of mindfulness-based leader development. When interventions are examined qualitatively, they can be viewed as "producing outcomes not directly but only via introducing resources into a setting which local actors may then use and in doing so may trigger mechanisms" (Warren et al., 2020, p. 3). Mechanisms are tendencies of people using and engaging with the resources of the program or intervention which could potentially bring about beneficial outcomes (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Intervention participants are expected to be able to provide realistic accounts of how the intervention works for them (Warren et al., 2020). Because of their senior position, organizational leaders as "elite informants" are considered to be knowledgeable, insightful, critical, and articulate (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019; Empson, 2018). Importantly, senior professionals are known to appreciate research interviews, as being interviewed gives them time to reflect, and the opportunity to talk genuinely to an outsider (Empson, 2018). Moreover, the content of a first-person description is always directly linked to the lived, conscious experience of a human who experiences it as subjectively relevant and for which the subjective self, the first person, can provide an account (Goldman-Schuyler et al., 2017; Varela & Shear, 1999). Our aim was to capture the leaders' accounts of their mental events, principally the motivations and intentions directing their behavior (Goldman-Schuyler et al., 2017), which is why we wanted to do qualitative interviews with them.

3.1. Choosing the partner training company

To execute this intervention research as designed, we chose a partner training company that specializes in delivering mindfulness interventions and a trainer with extensive experience as a mindfulness instructor and leadership coach. They also had a key role in identifying and recruiting the participating organizations.

3.2. Choosing the participating organizations

We maximized variation among participating organizations to identify common patterns by purposefully selecting (Patton, 2014) participating organizations from various industries and oriented on different markets (see Table 2). Five eight-week mindfulness interventions were organized in 2019, one for each participating organization.

3.3. Intervention

The research intervention was intended to address leaders' well-being- and performance-related challenges (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2022) and build their psychological, cognitive, and physiological resources (Gilbert et al., 2018). The focus of the intervention was on increasing participants' knowledge of mindfulness and introducing mindfulness practices.

Each intervention consisted of six 90-minute group sessions delivered at an approximately 1.5-week interval. The group sessions contained psychoeducational content, but the emphasis was on experiencing, self-reflection, and supporting the participants' motivation for independent practice. As the program was intended for a leader audience, there was room for discussion on topics relevant for them, for example, on leading a team. The program was built around four main themes: Attention, Insight, Acceptance, and Resilience. The participants were given a handbook containing theoretical background, self-reflection tasks and inquiry, and space for notes. As a practice-oriented approach, the program included a total of 16 (formal) mindfulness meditation practices marked as 'basic', 'dynamic', 'calming', and 'short'; one of each type of practices per each main theme. Regular home practice (10–15 min per day) was recommended, which is an important element of mindfulness interventions (Davidson & Kazniak, 2015). Participants received guidance for independent practice and had access to a mobile application featuring 16 mindfulness meditation recordings. In addition to introducing the formal mindfulness practices, it was emphasized throughout the program that integrating a mindful way of being into daily life (i.e., informal practice; Kabat-Zinn, 2011) was

Table 1
Mindfulness program structure and resources.

Mindfulness training program						
Content	**Part 1: Attention**	**Part 2: Insight**	**Part 3: Acceptance**	**Part 4: Resilience**	**Part 5: Motivation**	**Part 6: At the end of the training**
Topics covered	Background, proven effects, auto pilot, brain, meditation, breathing, thoughts-emotions-body, sleep.	Setting intentions, being mindful in daily life, thoughts are not facts, multitasking, doing vs. being, limiting beliefs	Mindfulness attitudes, acceptance, open awareness, conceptual and embodied awareness, perceived stress	Neuroscience and compassion, well-being, self-kindness, elements of self-compassion	Making mindfulness a daily routine, presence in everyday life	Wrapping up
Self-reflective 'mindful moment', inquiry and note-taking	Sleeping habits, motivation for daily practicing	Identifying limiting, and positive self-beliefs	Examining one's own stress	Self-compassion break, gratitude journal	Training log	Finding your true self
Formal mindfulness practices	Breathing anchor, Walking, Body scanning, Hourglass	You are not your thoughts, Moving in awareness, Body scanning (long), Water drops	Open awareness, Difficult situations, From head to toe, 3–6-3	Compassion, consciously in balance, Mountain meditation, This is me		
Live instruction: 90 min per part						
Handbook						
Mobile application (16 formal mindfulness practices)						
Recommendation for daily formal practice: 10–15 min						

intended. Servant leadership skills were not taught in the mindfulness training.

Table 1 provides information about the mindfulness program structure and resources.

3.4. Sample of informants

The sample of informants in this study consists of 62 leaders (56 female, 6 male) who participated in an intervention offered to them by their organizations, and who met the following criteria: a) submitted the written pre-task before the program start, b) were interviewed after the program, and c) gave their informed consent to help us comply with research ethics. The main criteria for our target population, individual leaders, was that they hold supervisory, manager or leader positions and have direct reports. In this study, a 'leader' is defined as a manager or supervisor with direct reports. Our informants were operational-level, departmental, and top-level managers, or leaders. Twenty-two of them worked in health, 17 in finance, nine in forestry, ten in information technology, and four in manufacturing. Their experience in leadership positions varied between one and 30 years (average 10 years). Their ages varied between 26 and 63 years (average 45 years). Fifty-two participants were Finnish, 10 had other European nationalities. Table 2 provides information about the interviewees and their organizations.

All of the research informants actively and voluntarily participated in the intervention, which is key in mindfulness programs (Davidson & Kazniak, 2015). Participants opted in by initially choosing to participate in the training program and subsequently by choosing to take part in the interviews. They were not paid to participate in the research. This research was conducted following the principles of research ethics and the notion that research should be conducted with the participants' informed consent, i.e., that the participant enters the research study voluntarily, with information about what the research entails, what it means for them to take part, and what they are consenting to. From the outset, confidentiality was prioritized and agreed upon with participants through informed consent. The Informed Consent form provided them with information about the research project and confidentiality, including the option to opt-out at any stage if they wished to do so (see Supplementary materials). Informed Consent was obtained from all participants.

As a number of drop-outs is expected in the course of a longer intervention research (Garavan et al., 2020), we purposefully determined a target sample size (Patton, 2014) of sixty interviewees to gain a sufficiently diverse sample that would ensure the richness of collected materials, credibility and theoretical saturation. To secure a large enough final sample size, we decided to deliver five training interventions. Had more groups been needed to meet the targeted sample size, we could have organized them. Because of careful planning and foresight, we achieved the final sample size that was very close to the target set at the beginning of the research project. As expected, we could not interview everyone who started the training and submitted the pre-tasks because of drop-out (twenty-six percent). Out of the total of 85 intervention participants, 22 did not sign up for an interview, and one interviewee had to be excluded from the final sample because they did not return the informed consent form. This resulted in 62 leaders being interviewed.

3.5. Data collection

Data collection took place between January and November 2019. We used multiple data types —written pre-tasks and semi-structured post-intervention interviews— collected at two time-points. While the interviews aimed to prompt participants to discuss significant aspects of their mindfulness experiences, the purpose of the pre-tasks was to provide context and contribute to a richer understanding of participants' journeys before and after the intervention (see Supplementary materials).

Before the intervention commenced, we asked the intervention participants to complete written pre-tasks. The participants were instructed to write about their recent experience and their expectations from the mindfulness training. We prompted them to, for example, reflect on "how you deal with situations at work and in private life that you may find challenging". The lengths of the written pre-tasks were typically one to two pages of typewritten text.

After the intervention ended, the participants were interviewed. We developed the interview guide to gain understanding of participants' subjective experiences with mindfulness learning and practice. We were interested in learning about diverse viewpoints and individual perspectives on mindfulness. The post-intervention interviews were semi-structured. The first author asked the interviewees about their experiences with mindfulness training (e.g., *What did you get out of this training; you may think of both private life and work life?*), how they understood and practiced mindfulness (e.g., *Please describe what mindfulness means to you, in your terms?*), how they viewed their development as a leader (e.

Table 2
Interviewees and participating organization.

Mindfulness intervention group	Type of organization	Industry	Number of interviewees *Total number across all organizations:* 62 (56 female, 6 male)	Roles of interviewees	Number of direct reports per interviewee
A	International; ~250 employees	Information technology	10 (7 female, 3 male)	Departmental manager (5) Top-level manager (5)	Average: 9; Range: 4—15
B	Local; >5000 employees	Public health	22 (all female)	Operative-level manager (20) Departmental manager (1) Top-level manager (1)	Average: 27; Range: 11—49
C	National; >3000 employees	Finance	17 (all female)	Operative-level manager (10) Departmental manager (7)	Average: 18; Range: 5—30
D	International; >300 employees	Manufacturing	4 (3 female, 1 male)	Operative-level manager (2) Departmental manager (2)	Average: 6; Range: 4—10
E	International; >5000 employees	Forestry	9 (7 female, 2 male)	Operative-level manager (5) Departmental manager (1) Top-level manager (3)	Average 5; Range: 1—10

g., *What is the most important area of development for you personally as a leader?*), and if and how they viewed mindfulness could support them in the leader role (e.g., *Do you see the mindfulness training offered for leaders, and mindfulness practice, could support your leadership and how?*). The interview guide was flexible and adapted based on what interviewees found meaningful, with slight modifications based on previous interviews. Asking follow-up questions required stepping outside the guiding structure when the interviewer sensed an area of importance for the interviewee. Examples were asked to allow in-depth exploration and enrich the interviewees' descriptions. We did not ask questions about servant leadership.

The interviewing started immediately after the program ended and the majority of the interviews could be conducted within the first and second week after the training ended. Maximum three weeks passed between the end of the training and the interview. Doing this, our aim was to gather rich interview material that would shed light on the training experience of the leaders while it was still vivid in their memory. The interview duration varied between 26 and 76 min (average 48 min). The interviews took place within a work setting during office hours. 39 interviews were conducted face-to-face and 23 remotely. Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent.

3.6. Data analysis

The data used for the analysis consisted of 62 written pre-intervention tasks and 62 semi-structured post-intervention interviews. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Written pre-intervention task materials totaled 90.5 pages of text (39,502 words). Interview transcripts totaled 864 pages of text (34,8345 words). Materials were downloaded into the NVivo software. Each participant was assigned a code which consisted of a letter according to their intervention group (A-E) and a participant number within the group. The excerpts shown in the Findings were labeled accordingly (e.g., A1). To ensure confidentiality, names and other identifying details of the participants were removed from the data excerpts.

To interpret the qualitative data, we employed thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) as our specific analytical approach. Our goal was to create representative themes that accurately reflect the meaning of what is in the data (Patton, 2014; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). We followed a systematic process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) which entails six phases: (1) Familiarizing yourself with your data, (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the report.

Our data analysis process began with open engagement with the materials as the first author familiarized themselves (step 1) with the data. Materials were read several times. An initial engagement with the data had already begun in the interviewing phase, and notes were taken continuously. We first approached our qualitative material openly to gain an overarching, holistic understanding of the experienced value of mindfulness learning in leadership, and subsequently by focusing on the ways in which leaders applied mindfulness learning to foster other-oriented leadership attitudes and behaviors.

In the analytical process, we followed the guidelines of Patton (2014) for researcher triangulation. The first author read and coded all of the interviews, and the second author read and coded all the interviews that were conducted in English. Both authors reviewed the findings. The authors independently coded the data and cross-checked each other's coding. We discussed the data, shared insights, and considered different perspectives that emerged in the interview data (Patton, 2014). Double coding deepened the author team's familiarity with the data, allowed the author team to confirm the distinctiveness between themes, and verify the consistency of the identified themes.

The iterative data analysis process involved initial coding (step 2 by Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the leader participants' descriptions of their experiences of mindfulness training and their practices of applying mindfulness. As suggested by Charmaz (2006), during initial coding we closely studied fragments of data. We were stimulated by the interesting initial observation that many mindfulness-trained leaders were keen to take their newly-acquired mindfulness learning into action so that their followers could benefit ("Starting from the very first training session, I have introduced the learning to my team, and we have done practices with the app", C4; "It is a question of how to ensure people stay capable for the next 40, 50 years", D3). We continued to further search for interesting themes (step 3). The follower-perspective seemed significant in many of the interviewed leaders' experiences ("The most important for me is to really stand in the team. I want to feel what they feel, I want to know what their concerns are, because for me it's important that I know what is going on and I can help them and coach them in the right way.", E7). During this focused coding (Charmaz, 2006), we continuously compared elements of data with each other and with our codes.

In our analyses, it was meaningful to explore how the leaders described the relevance of mindfulness training for them in their leader

Table 3
Second-order themes and exemplary quotations.

Theme	Description	Exemplary quotations
Developing oneself as a servant leader		
Self-awareness	Leaders come to understand their qualities, emotions, and behaviors, as well as motivations, goals, and values, and who they are as part of the larger context, through practicing self-reflection, maintaining authenticity, developing emotional skills, and gaining transformative insights.	*The biggest benefit that comes from [mindfulness], and has already come, is really the stopping and kind of reflecting, like'okay this went like this', 'this I could think in another way', and taking distance to everyday topics … so this is the thing leaders like myself get from this.* (A5) *I am very compassionate towards others, … but self-compassion, that's difficult. [It was] eye-opening to understand [through mindfulness learning] that if I were someone else, I would have a totally different attitude [towards myself]. How come you are so hard on yourself in everything? … no one demands that or gives that feedback … It is only self-critique. … The biggest realization in this training: Could I be more lenient towards myself?* (B12) *[Mindfulness] has kind of helped me out of the normal rat race … it's been even so big that… you are here, you live here, not like the work week passes and you only wait for the weekend, or vacation……. If I feel like I need rest, or if I feel bad, I can be still for a while to gain strength, not push it. You let yourself feel... I mean, when you change your attitude to life with this [mindfulness], then it is quite radical, I didn't quite expect anything like that.* (A6)
Self-care	Leaders develop the capacity to take care of their physical, mental, and social well-being, through establishing a personal mindfulness practice, restoring their mental resources, protecting their personal boundaries, and maintaining healthy habits.	*When I start feeling anxious or irritated or something, I find the breath, and the breath is the takeaway for me, I find it when I go to bed. When something waiting ahead causes this horrendous anxiety so that I feel my heart pounding in my ears, then with the breath I get that anxiety and heart rate to lower.* (B13) *I am getting a little tired, a little frustrated, let's say it's a stressful phase right now, so [mindfulness] increases my tolerance and patience, to take all this, to live this through without drowning……. There are hectic situations, resource shortage,... team members' wishes,... so you put all that into perspective in a different way, like, you don't throw more petrol to your own feelings.* (C14) *All of a sudden I realized that … I need peace to work … somehow I've thought that it's great to always keep the door open and in a way be always available and all that, but now I realize that it is not great, in fact, if you then don't do well yourself, and if you are always available at the expense of your own well-being … when you can sometimes close the door … after all, if there is an acute issue then people can get in of course.* (B22)
Serving the follower		
Relationship building	Leaders develop their one-on-one relationships followers, by dedicating time and attention to them, engaging in active listening, providing individualized support to them, sharing their own vulnerabilities, and supporting followers with interpersonal challenges.	*Focus on presenter, a person I talk to, my team members, they all deserve attention and focus. … I have tried this before, but mindfulness amplified the whole thing…. I am more aware of my actions, my well-being at the very moment, important was kind of how emotions play out, how I behave in meetings, especially in one-to-one discussions.* (A7) *With these [mindfulness] practices, presence, listening, these type of things, you can give enormous resources for the work community, and the employees feel important when they can really come talk to you and they are truly being listened to.* (B21) *Don't treat others the way* you *want to be treated. Rather how* they *want to be treated…… I believe the work life is definitely going in the direction where the challenges are in people's own thoughts and coping... Like Brene Brown has said, in the past work life you needed the biceps, today you need the brain, in the future you need the heart…. So I think mindfulness and the hearts meeting each other could be the combination.* (D2)
Follower development	Leaders proactively support their followers' professional development in a holistic way, through mentoring, coaching, and guiding, developing followers' skills, supporting followers' emotional development, and supporting followers' career development.	*Leadership is a lot about raising questions and coaching … One should not hurry or go ahead of things, but rather stop, observe and allow the time for the interaction situation in that moment, and when you want to guide the other person to a certain direction it does not happen instantly, so with mindfulness you can learn patience.* (A2) *We have started one unit meeting with [mindfulness], and in the future probably more, I just have to remember to bring this more … We really need to be able to stop … [My followers] are open to this and they want to do a good job…… Everyone knows how challenging it is... To stop to and give [the customer] the time, even when there are a million things going on.* (B10) *So, I'm just saying that how powerful this [mindfulness] can be in a group, your influence to the group. And of course, the more mindless the leader, the more difficult things are getting. I have … example with another team member who actually… I was not doing more than just coaching and a little bit of supporting in that direction that… you know, basically sharing with the person what I know, and, I could see the difference.* (E1)
Follower well-being	Leaders proactively support their followers' physical, mental and social well-being, through sharing knowledge about mindfulness, introducing mindfulness practices, encouraging follower self-care, and helping followers overcome adversity.	*I hope I can give these learnings to my team members, it is really the most important thing, to get them some help. Of course, there are some who are interested and know about it …but to give the benefits for the others, too. The breathing practices are such that you notice the benefits immediately … so I thought we approach this through the practices first, and then I can also share some of the learnings.* (C13) *I want to bring what I learned into the team also when I see that somebody in my team is struggling … I'm asking them these questions. How do you feel now … to bring them down to help them in that situation.* (E4) *In the future, when someone comes to the workplace really nervous or so …I think it's important to be able to react to the people's situations in the right way, like investigate their current state a little bit, when they come to me, so that I could say*

(*continued on next page*)

Table 3 (*continued*)

Theme	Description	Exemplary quotations
		the right things to calm them down and see that now I need to calm this person down before we can proceed anywhere from this situation. (B15)
Serving the team		
Team culture	Leaders build a healthy and productive working culture among their group of followers, through modeling positive behaviors, cultivating mutual appreciation, and encouraging collaboration.	*Every leader is a model example, and if mindfulness in some way helps focus better and respond in a calm manner, reflect upon matters, give this kind of model that I don't say anything immediately but wait 'till next day, it can benefit the entire team.* (A2) *In that meeting we will go over this [mindfulness], so it's easier to make this a longer-lasting thing……. Everyone can do some pre-work, like list what we could do and what mindfulness could mean to us, and we can discuss and choose our focus areas, like how we could... for instance improve our team's collaboration, own well-being and the team's well-being, and then monitor that on a weekly basis.* (E3) *Mindfulness supports individuals' working, and with it you can also improve ……. for instance, collaboration, there are so many different kinds of people, so with mindfulness you can develop how they communicate, and support collaboration, so I think becoming aware of all this you can recognize the things that should be improved and learned.* (A3)

role, how they applied the learning, and how they perceived the application of mindfulness might generate beneficial outcomes. The first author continuously drafted thematic maps throughout the process. During theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006) when we grouped codes into broader categories, we arrived at three main thematic categories that integrated the substantive codes into a coherent framework, thereby enhancing the level of abstraction in our analysis through theoretical dimensions. In the review and naming phases (steps 4 and 5), regular discussions between the authors concerning the themes provided a deeper understanding of the findings.

Gioia et al. (2012) present a systematic approach to new concept development to enhance qualitative rigor and transparency in inductive research, emphasizing a foundation in grounded theory (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the reporting phase (step 6), we used their approach as a toolkit to support the analysis and presentation of our qualitative data that contains themes and processes to be revealed, rather than predefined categories (Gioia et al., 2012). The data structure (see Fig. 1) demonstrates the informant-centric terms and codes presented as first-order concepts, the researcher-centric themes presented as second-order themes, and the aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2012). We created a data table (see Table 3) that includes detailed descriptions of the second-order themes and supplementary examples from our dataset to provide further evidence of the identified patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Furthermore, we developed a conceptual framework that combines the key findings (see Fig. 2).

4. Findings

4.1. Pre-intervention challenges and desires

The pre-intervention findings are discussed first to provide an understanding of the context in which the interviewed leaders worked. Then, the post-intervention findings are presented.

The leaders documented their leadership challenges in the written pre-intervention tasks before the mindfulness program started. Firstly, the leaders reported that they struggled to manage a *demanding workload* amidst constant changes in the work environment, which they viewed to negatively impact their ability to engage in positive, other-oriented leadership behaviors. While acting in an other-oriented way seemed to be a key priority by most of the leaders (unprompted, many discussed wanting to support their followers), as the leader's well-being was compromised, they erred on the side of protecting their own resources, rather than engaging with their followers. This leader, like many others, recognized that they often felt inadequate, overwhelmed, demotivated, and stressed out by negative events, such as lack of support and issues with staffing, which had flow-on effects on how they lead:

> I am a leader of a team of seven people, but I don't really have time for them. I am working on several projects and … have more than enough to do … I tend to be very nervous and always stressed. … it feels all too much because everybody wants something from me. … I cannot listen to my team, especially to all the tiny issues my team has. (E4)

Secondly, many discussed difficulties in their *relationships with followers*. Let aside the lack of presence and interconnectedness and not being able to dedicate enough time to the followers, there were accounts of frustration with follower performance. For instance, this leader recognized the limitations of their ability to accept followers and develop their strengths, instead defaulting to a performance-focused position:

> I try to see the people in the work community neutrally, but I often feel frustration and anger at their incapability … I'm fact- and performance-focused, and the area of development for me clearly is in people leadership, facilitating insights and motivating them. I would like to be more present … and interested in people and better understand how they think. How could I be more approachable? (A2)

Thirdly, leaders discussed challenges related to *team functioning*, such as conflicts and a lack of collaboration and team members' commitment to team goals. Many wanted to encourage a positive working environment where they could motivate and inspire responsibility-taking and commitment among followers but felt powerless amidst the engrained negative culture. This gap made some leaders question their follower-focused motivation to lead, as exemplified by this leader:

> [I] try to prevent conflict situations between individuals and try to get them to see more positive than negative … I'm not sure if I'm up for the task of managing 13 people's conflict of interests … I [am thinking] "grow up", "get over yourselves" which is even a bit mean. I'm generally a very empathetic person, … now I sometimes feel that people are complaining for no good reason. (A10)

As the pre-intervention analysis indicated, there seems to be a will to engage in other-oriented leadership, but workable strategies and tools may not always be readily available. The post-intervention interviews demonstrated that by integrating mindfulness learning into their leadership, leaders can circumvent these barriers and more successfully implement the other-oriented approach they desire.

Next, we present the post-intervention findings on how the leaders applied mindfulness learnings in their leadership work. In the analysis of the post-intervention interviews, we identified 23 leadership behaviors across six themes that the leaders actively engaged in due to mindfulness learnings, occurring on three levels of leadership: the self, the follower, and the team. In our findings, the most prevalent main theme was 'developing oneself as a servant leader' (over 600 references). The

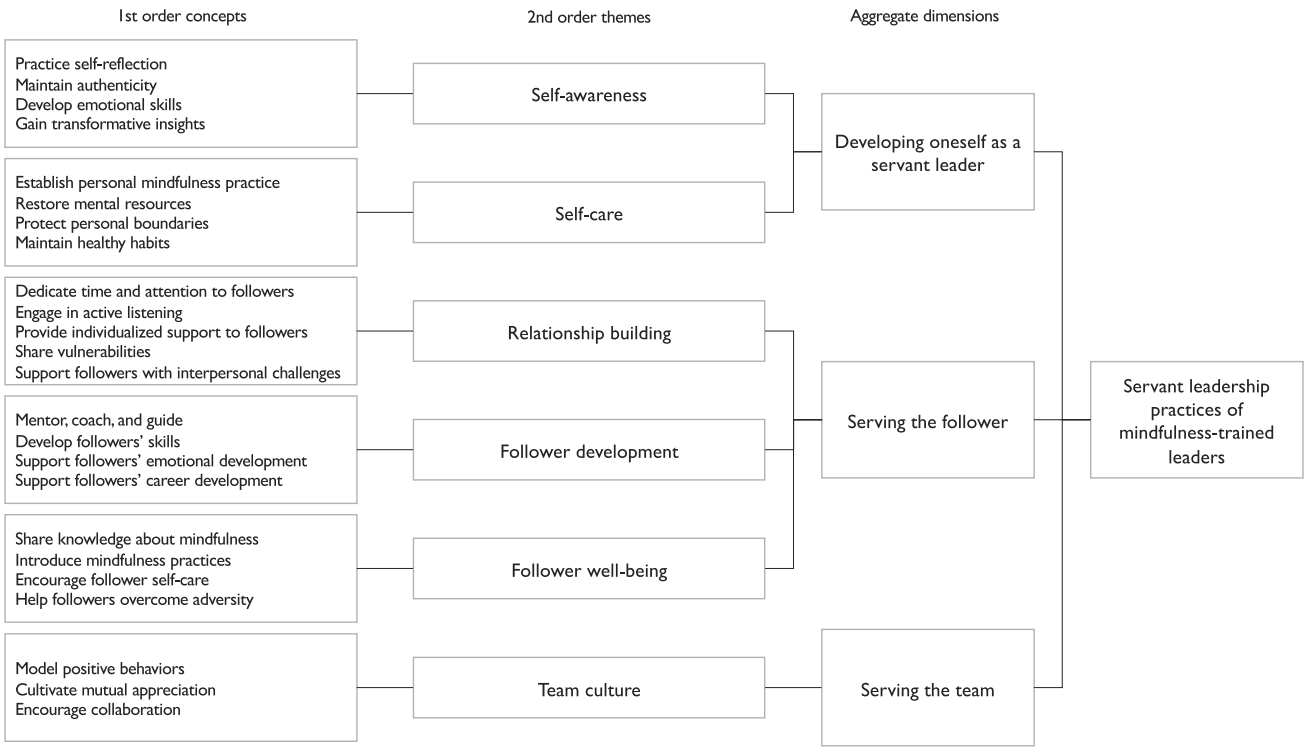

Fig. 1. Data structure for servant leadership practices of mindfulness-trained leaders.

second most prevalent main theme was 'serving the follower' (over 300 references), and the third most prevalent main theme was 'serving the team' (over 100 references). Sixty-one of our interviewees made references that fell into these identified themes, highlighting their meaningfulness to the informants. Fig. 1 summarizes the themes and subthemes.

4.2. *Developing oneself as a servant leader*

At the personal level, it was imperative for the leaders to first attend to themselves by delving into a profound self-awareness and actively undertaking tangible self-caring measures to nurture their physical, psychological, and social well-being. Leaders applied mindfulness to focus on self, so that the leader has regular motivation and capacity to focus on others. Leaders viewed mindfulness training as a holistic personal development approach entailing the key themes of self-awareness and self-care.

4.2.1. *Self-awareness*

The interviewed leaders described their motivation to explore mindfulness as a means to develop themselves and thereby become more attuned to other people in their social context. Through mindfulness training and practice, leaders came to better understand their qualities, emotions, and behaviors, as well as motivations, goals, and values, and who they are as part of the larger context. Mindfulness learning was experienced to have raised self-awareness through *practicing self-reflection*, *maintaining authenticity*, *developing emotional skills*, and *gaining transformative insights*. For example, leaders noted a significant improvement in their ability to recognize, manage, and regulate their emotions and behaviors. This motivated them to use this capacity to foster better relationships with their followers, extending their self-awareness to encompass social awareness. They accomplished this by initially dealing with their own emotions and subsequently using this awareness to recognize and respond to their followers' emotions. When leaders noticed these benefits, they became interested in applying mindfulness in their leadership. The leaders' stories illuminate that through active self-reflection and understanding one's own behavior, the leader can better understand their team members' behavior, such as their communication and conflicts. Importantly, enhanced self-awareness enables the leader to take the other's perspective (i.e., an other-orientation). It was common that the leaders thought consciously taking the time for introspection, observing the mind's content and one's actions would benefit the team, as this leader said:

> I wasn't aware of these situations. This is something which changed. So, mindfulness to me is something where I self-reflect myself more … if I understand my behavior better, I can also understand other people's behavior better … So, by using mindfulness and understanding … why am I behaving in certain situations like I do? this helps *me* on one hand, but it helps me also to understand my team members better. So why are people reacting or behaving in certain situations is easier if you understand yourself. Then you can at least try to follow why a person is now behaving like they are. (A9)

Overall, the leaders were now more curious about themselves and their intentions as a leader.

4.2.2. *Self-care*

Leaders reported experiences of becoming aware of the meaning and importance of their own well-being and needs related to one's quality of life and acting upon those needs through better self-care strategies. The leaders often described how mindfulness learning had helped them develop their capacity to take care of their physical, mental, and social well-being, through *establishing a personal mindfulness practice, restoring their mental resources, protecting their personal boundaries,* and *maintaining healthy habits*. Numerous leaders highlighted the transformative impact of mindfulness learning on their ability to establish clearer personal boundaries, particularly when managing work-related tasks and responding to demands. Many anticipated that mindfulness learning will enable them to make more conscious choices and become more confident in declining requests or tasks (saying 'no' more often). Adopting

practices such as focusing on one task at a time and minimizing interruptions by silencing their phones to protect their boundaries could, then, result in a sense of empowerment. A typical statement of insight was related to taking care of oneself to take care of followers. For instance, this leader, who had experienced numerous physical stress symptoms without full awareness, described how mindfulness learning helped alleviate pain and understand the importance of 'me-time', leading to the conscious decision and actions to prioritize self-care amidst their busy schedules:

> I see [mindfulness] as a very handy tool, not only for applying as a team leader or within the management team, but I think also in my personal life … It's a tool to keep everything well balanced … that you have a bit of 'me' time. I must say that it did me rather good, also with the yoga classes – that's really something that is 'me' time. (E7)

Overall, it was typical that leaders had found a way to integrate mindfulness into their work-life in a way that suited their schedules and level of comfort with mindfulness. Many reported having a regular formal meditation practice. Others said they had developed an informal mindfulness practice, which often involved taking short breathing breaks, using reminders to be present, moving from one physical place to another with awareness, consciously marking a transition from one virtual meeting to another, or walking in nature with awareness.

4.3. Serving the follower

At the follower level, the leaders were primarily concerned with their ability to genuinely place the needs of others at the forefront, especially after ensuring care for themselves. In line with the leaders' commitment to prioritizing the followers' needs, numerous leaders emphasized that sharing their tangible mindfulness insights with employees validated the value of their participation in the training. Many interviewees viewed that they had acquired knowledge and concrete tools or techniques to share with followers, either explicitly (for instance, sharing mindfulness practices) or implicitly (for instance, taking an accepting attitude in a challenging interaction), to transfer the benefits to the team. Essentially, the leaders showed an active commitment to reshaping their mindset, fostering a less ego-centric and more selfless disposition toward others, and creating the space for others to express their perspectives by stepping back when necessary. Many leaders found that mindfulness learning had changed their experience of how they lead others. They understood that without understanding who they are (self-awareness) and having the capacity (self-care), they could not trust themselves to fully support their employees. Interviewed leaders recognized that mindfulness skills were required as a precursor to support followers in the day-to-day leadership work and improve the quality of leader–follower relations, which are reflected in the themes of relationship building, follower development, and follower well-being.

4.3.1. Relationship building

Leaders discussed how mindfulness learning had affected the quality of their relationship with their followers. As stated by many interviewees, being aware and caring of other people was seen as the cornerstone of good leader–follower relations. This appeared to be a circular process, which strengthened the leader–follower relations.

Through mindfulness training, many leaders understood that being truly present and *dedicating time and attention* to the followers conveyed caring and interest, and increased interconnectedness. For this leader, resolving their own stress was a key to opening to their followers:

> Maybe [team members] feel that they cannot come to me with questions, or they feel that I'm stressed all the time. And I can see that they are coming more [after training] … I stepped out of my projects at least a bit … Before, I was not there, I was … occupied all the time, and I think [mindfulness] helped me a lot. (E4)

The leaders felt mindfulness learning to have strengthened their intention to put followers' needs before the needs of the organization or themselves. It was common that leaders put aside the urges of their egos in interactions with followers through a conscious effort of creating space for the follower to have a say and feel heard. Many found mindfulness practice to support *active listening*, especially in difficult one-on-one discussions and guiding team members to make independent decisions. For instance, this leader described the significance of mindfulness training for their ability to listen to really understand their team members:

> I've had to learn not to offer ready answers but rather let the people come up with the answers themselves, so it's been about the skill to listen, to be present and let your own thoughts be and focus on listening to others' thoughts, also those that they don't say out loud straight away. (C15)

Providing individualized support as a demonstration of a leader's mindfulness skills was seen as valuable in interactions with followers. For instance, this leader believed mindfulness learnings helped them adopt a follower's viewpoint and thus offer more individualized support:

> From the leadership perspective [mindfulness helps] when you learn to monitor your own coping and stress levels a little, it will inevitably be reflected in how you are able to help others, too, and kind of better understand the other's situation. (D1)

Some of the interviewed leaders reported how they had *shared vulnerabilities* more openly because of mindfulness training because they valued the relationship and wanted to strengthen mutual trust. Fascinatingly, leaders told how they had learned to turn their difficult experiences (such as past burnout cases, or harshness towards oneself) into a leadership strength, trusting their openness would strengthen team relationships. For instance, one leader who acknowledged their inclination toward harsh self-criticism, openly discussed this trait with team members (some of whom shared a similar tendency) because of undergoing mindfulness training. The leader actively sought a solution beneficial to the entire team, aiming to introduce a more flexible approach, as exemplified here:

> I am quite self-critical, like many are, so now I have become somehow more lenient towards myself, or I try to be. So that I wouldn't be so harsh to myself, scolding myself for something that didn't go well. … we discussed this … together [as a team] and we thought about how one could go easier on themselves… some find work or private life stressful, so people should be more lenient towards themselves. It is a bit tricky – Even when your supervisor says "You're doing enough" … people go to this mode of scolding themselves. (E8)

Many leaders found that mindfulness techniques gave them tools to *support followers with interpersonal challenges,* and that way helped build strong leader–follower relationships. Interviewees said they applied mindfulness techniques in one-on-one meetings and in the middle of heated situations to calm down employees and help them change perspectives. For instance, this leader described how they had applied mindfulness to talk two team members through an argument:

> They told me two completely different versions of it … and I found it really confusing. But then I thought about what had been discussed on the course. … I explained that in these kinds of situations people often see the situation in a different way, … and that there are two differing viewpoints here, neither of them right nor wrong. … Then we talked quite a lot about this. (D4)

4.3.2. Follower development

The interviewees saw mindfulness learning to have more profound influences on how they interact with, lead, and develop followers holistically. This started with recasting how they coached their followers, to encompass skill, emotional, and career development. The interviewed leaders often discussed integrating mindfulness learnings in their

mentoring, coaching and guiding practices to better focus on the follower's holistic development rather than their performance. For instance, one leader described how mindfulness, which to them represented 'one step back' thinking, could be applied in their organization to help followers look at issues from novel perspectives:

> I see [mindfulness] as a tool [for my followers] to take to their own teams … It's rather like'hey think about this in a different way' or'let's stop for a moment', not having to stop and breathe and count, but … bring this 'one step back' thinking. (A5)

Many leaders believed that through mindfulness, they could facilitate *followers' skill development* needed for productive working. Participants of the training realized that many people could enhance their productivity and concentration by enhancing their presence and awareness, reducing distractions and avoiding multitasking. For instance, this leader strongly felt that mindfulness practice could help their expert team members better concentrate on the cognitively demanding work tasks:

> People are a lot more productive when they can … be more present and aware … There is a lot of hassle, [team members] can't concentrate on some new guidance for instance. [Mindfulness] would help many people as the day-to-day is so demanding these days … and we should somehow offer it more. It's great that supervisors got [training], next the experts need it. (C10)

Some leaders found that mindfulness training offered them a chance to *support followers' emotional development*. For instance, immediately after the mindfulness training, one leader had implemented a practice of describing one's emotional state — a 'check-in moment'— which started every team meeting to increase followers' levels of awareness of their own and each other's emotions. Another leader shared with a team member what they had learned in mindfulness training about accepting one's emotions:

> Something was bothering [them], teenagers making a mess, it made [them] anxious. I said to [them] that I also have a teenager at home and yes, [their] room is a chaos, [but] half of it is done if [they've] placed [their] tableware on the draining board even if not inside the dishwasher – I don't have to go to [their] room. … [They were] like 'maybe I should think of it that way' … Idea being, why worry about everything, bang your head to the wall? (B2)

Mindfulness was also mentioned as a method to support followers in long-term *career development.* For instance, one leader explained how they saw mindfulness as a profound developmental approach to enhance especially young employees' self-knowledge in a way that could help them cope and succeed throughout the long careers:

> I would take [mindfulness training] up as a self-knowledge course … like, how to make people understand that this can prolong your career, to invest in yourself … it is a question of how to ensure people stay capable for the next 40, 50 years. (D3)

4.3.3. Follower well-being

Overall, the interviewed leaders conveyed that taking care of follower well-being and responding to their followers' psychological needs was becoming core to their leadership work. As our findings demonstrate, the leaders strongly believed that employee and organizational performance was more likely when followers had higher levels of well-being (note, we did not collect objective performance data, these are only the leaders' perceptions of performance). Many interviewees described having witnessed various issues with employee coping, at times resulting in burnout, and having experienced such hardship personally. Thus, increasing followers' understanding of the mindfulness concept, introducing mindfulness practice, encouraging follower self-care, and helping followers overcome challenging situations were usually brought up in the leaders' accounts as they intended to apply mindfulness to support follower well-being.

A major theme that arose from the interviews was promoting follower well-being through mindful practices. Several interviewees started by *knowledge sharing of mindfulness* with their team members to increase shared understanding of the important topic. Typically, leaders said they wanted to take time in a weekly or monthly team meeting to *introduce mindfulness practice* to followers, usually by engaging in a formal mindfulness practice via the available mobile application. Many expressed mindfulness learning to provide a concrete tool to support their motivation to put the employee first. This leader, for instance, emphasized that they wanted to attend the training in the first place to be able to provide their team the opportunity to benefit from it, leading them to share the mindfulness knowledge and experiment with the practices with the team:

> I want to take it to my team because … some of them are burdened and looking for tools that would help deal with [stress] … So, starting from the very first training session, I have introduced the theory to my team, and we have done practices with the app. (C4)

Many leaders realized that mindfulness learning could be a way for them to *encourage follower self-care*, such as taking time off work tasks and improving work-life balance. For example, one leader viewed mindfulness as a preventive method to build resilience:

> To learn how to relax, how to take time…not even at work but at home, as well … And, just to take time out for themselves. … I think the testing times are ahead. … I think that mindfulness will come more into play next year when we start to go through [a major organizational change], because it's going to be affecting a lot of people's personal lives, not only work, but it's also to do with their personal life. (E10)

Many times, interviewees understood that having acquired mindfulness learnings and useful tools to deal with various workplace challenges, they were in a key position to apply those learnings to *help followers overcome adversity*. It was clear that many leaders felt a sense of responsibility for their team members, especially when they noticed others being challenged. Many expressed that they wanted to handle difficult situations more effectively and respond more empathetically but had previously lacked the necessary tools to support their team members. For instance, this leader explained that mindfulness training had provided them tools to solve a demanding situation which, they recognized, could seriously risk follower well-being:

> [Mindfulness] surely helps in the close work community, and I have better means to … solve some difficult situations, like how I respond to them or how I help the employees for example in this situation that is currently on, which supports the employees so that they don't get drowned and will stay capable and can go to work in the first place. (B14)

4.4. Serving the team

At the team level, leaders emphasized the importance of instilling a collective sense of encouragement and benevolence toward others within the entire team. These leaders firmly believed that their role placed them in a pivotal position to serve as exemplars, illustrating the process of cultivating an altruistic attitude and its translation into tangible, actionable behaviors. Many leaders saw that mindfulness knowledge could benefit the culture of their team. Their desire was to create a positive working environment characterized by trust, appreciation, inspiration, and motivation, which is echoed in the theme of team culture.

4.4.1. Team culture

The interviewed leaders generally saw themselves as role models who influence other people. Many interviewees felt that by *modeling*

positive behaviors, they could positively influence the culture of the team. Leaders leveraged mindfulness to address the hectic work pace and attempt to create a calm working environment. For instance, this leader recognized that as a leader their presence had an influence on the work culture, and they saw mindfulness as a personal tool that could enable them to consciously act as a positive role model:

> It begins from leadership, I mean if the leader is present and focused, one can communicate that also to others, how everyone should change their routines and practices and how that would then become easier for everyone. (E5)

Many leaders believed that the mindfulness training had helped them put more emphasis on positive attitudes and *cultivating mutual appreciation* in their leadership work. For instance, this leader said that mindfulness skills support respect and a non-judgmental attitude in work communication:

> At best, you build on the thoughts of each other, then it becomes a dialogue. … We have now three people from the management group in this mindfulness … What I hope that brings us is really being able to listen to others without taking what the other says as judging or objecting, rather being open even when disagreeing … Showing respect. (A8)

Finally, it was important for many of the interviewed leaders to guide their followers towards the common goal. Leaders believed that mindfulness training offered opportunities for smarter working and helped develop a team that worked better together through *encouraging collaboration*. For instance, one leader planned to involve followers in ideating mindful work practices to reduce the cognitive strain of the entire work community. Another leader had started to encourage their team members to participate more actively, and had already seen their team members collaborate more:

> We have this kind of co-working, in a way more like sharing and they really reach out to also support me, it's … not all on my responsibility, but they ideate and bring information … They are not like, 'oh, that's the supervisor's job and we won't comment or consider it', it's more that they come really eagerly … to help out and then we solve it together. … We have even more of it now [after mindfulness training]. (B18)

The same leader highlighted the responsibility of organizational management to align the value of well-being with the action of providing resources such as mindfulness training:

> It is … up to organizational management, how they enable, and it is surely about values, like what is being valued. … It would be good if management took responsibility for this, as I see a lot of ethical burden in this work community … and the work is psychologically [and] cognitively burdening, so with mindfulness learnings we would achieve … peace of mind and calmness in day-to-day situations. (B18)

It was common that the leaders discussed the long-term potential of mindfulness to serve the entire organization. Many highlighted the importance of the tangible resources provided by their organization to the program, and the broader support to increase the acceptance of mindfulness across the organization and integrate it into organizational values and practices.

In sum, the leaders in our study perceived their improved behaviors to strengthen leader–follower relations (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Apparently, due to an enhanced ability to take care of one's own well-being and develop themselves, the leaders felt mindfulness learning to have strengthened their intention to put followers' needs before the needs of the organization or themselves, which is characteristic of servant leaders (Sendjaya et al., 2008).

Table 3 provides descriptions of the second-order themes, and exemplary quotations.

5. Discussion

We set out to examine the potential of utilizing mindfulness interventions for servant leadership development. Drawing from pre- and

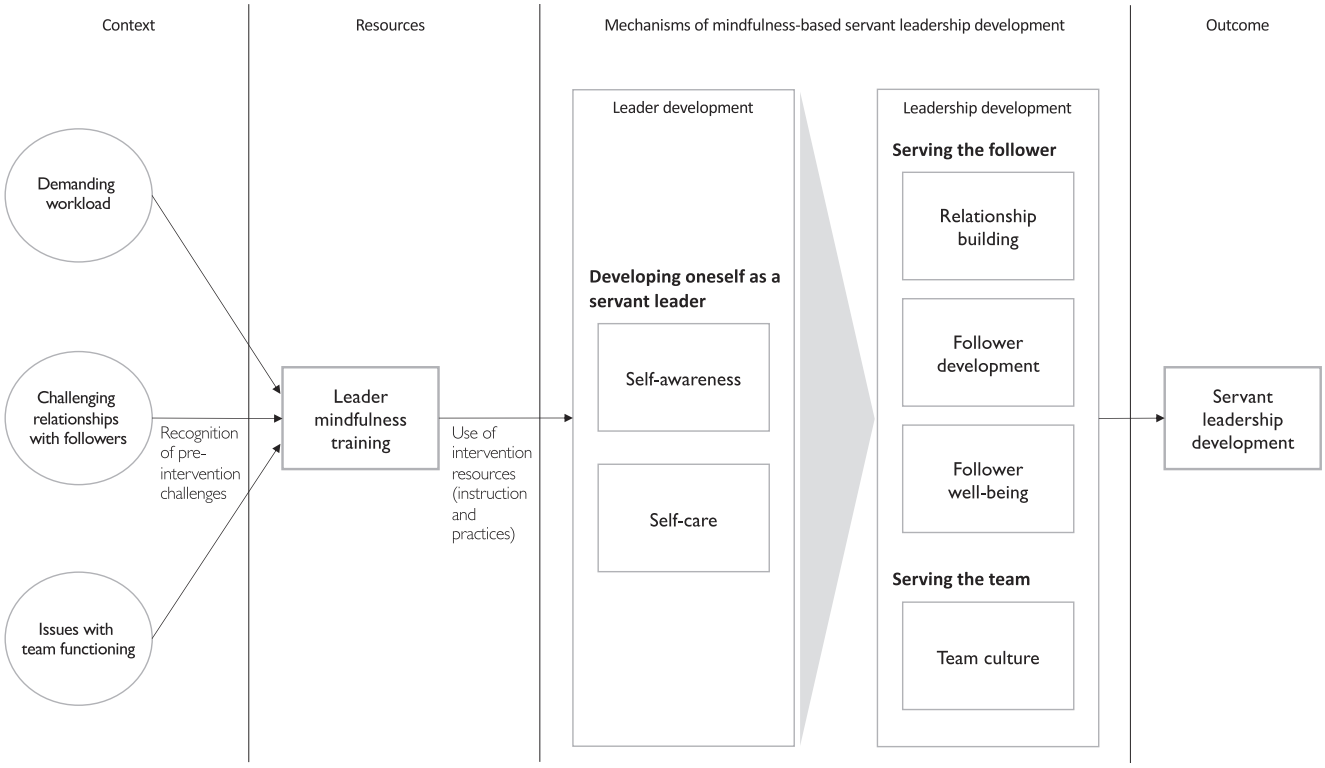

Fig. 2. Conceptual framework of developing servant leadership with leader mindfulness training.

post-intervention materials from 62 leaders who attended a mindfulness intervention, we have provided a rich analysis of leaders' perceptions. Our pre-intervention inquiry revealed the leaders' desire to support their followers and prioritize their well-being and development needs, however, due to demanding workloads, troublesome relationships with followers, and issues with team functioning, engaging in servant leadership was still a bridge too far for many leaders. Analyzing of the post-intervention interviews, we identified three mechanisms that explicate how leaders apply mindfulness in their day-to-day leadership work to benefit themselves, their followers, and the work community: 1) Developing oneself as a servant leader (self-awareness and self-care), 2) Serving the follower (relationship building, follower development and well-being), and 3) Serving the team (team culture).

We provide a conceptual framework (see Fig. 2) that integrates the components of mindfulness-based servant leadership development. The left section of the figure outlines the challenges leaders face before mindfulness training (i.e., the heading labeled context). The second-left section of the figure connects these pre-intervention challenges with how leaders voluntarily and actively engage with the mindfulness intervention, instruction, and mindfulness practices (i.e., resources). The following section of the figure combines these learnings and practices into day-to-day leadership behaviors (i.e., mechanisms) to develop the leaders themselves, and to serve their followers, and the team. The right-most section of the figure presents servant leadership development as the outcome of the mechanisms (i.e., outcome; Warren et al., 2020). Our framework extends existing servant leadership models (e.g., Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008) by teasing out how leaders can benefit from mindfulness training to enhance the self, followers, and the team, rather than only the behaviors that they should engage in to be seen as servant leaders. Next, we reflect on the contribution of our findings to the literature on mindfulness and leadership development.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

First, we challenge previous work on servant leadership development (e.g., Eva & Sendjaya, 2013; Lemoine et al., 2021) that jumps straight to specific skills or competencies that servant leaders should engage in, by demonstrating that there is merit and downstream payoffs (in terms of follower development and follower well-being) in attending to the development of the leader in terms of their self-awareness and self-care. This builds on and provides empirical evidence to the arguments made by Sendjaya (2015) that servant leadership development needs to be underscored with the development of the character (or being) of the leader and the work more broadly on leadership development of the importance of developing leader self-awareness (Day & Dragoni, 2015). It demonstrates that servant leadership development starts from within, underscoring mindfulness, a holistic individual-level practice, as an appropriate method to support the development of leaders who want to serve others. Even though the self-focus of mindfulness practices (for instance, focusing on breathing and cultivating self-compassion) has been proposed as a potential obstacle for servant leadership development as it is focused on self, rather than others (Reb et al., 2015), it is important to acknowledge that the learning and growth of individuals (at the level of the leader) have an impact on the collective (the team of followers) through social interactions among its members, as highlighted by Badham and King (2021) and Wallace et al. (2021). In fact, the leaders' desire to apply mindfulness learning to focus on self, so that they have the capacity to focus on others, is consistent with the tenets of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). Prior servant leadership literature has proposed that developing a deep self-awareness is a key to servant leadership development and the ability to engage regularly in servant behaviors (Sendjaya, 2015). This is consistent with research on leader self-awareness being linked to a variety of positive leadership outcomes, such as humility, effectiveness, and emotional intelligence (see Chon & Sitkin, 2021). Yet, understanding practices that can enhance this development is sorely lacking. As our analysis demonstrates, leaders reported that mindfulness training strengthened their motivation and capacity to serve their followers because their newfound self-awareness 'tapped into' their pro-social orientation and afforded them the space to act upon it (Reb et al., 2015; Shapiro & Carlson, 2017; Skoranski et al., 2019). When the leader becomes aware of their thoughts and emotions within their workplace, they bring that awareness into their interaction with followers. The leaders' interest in applying mindfulness to enhance their self- and social awareness in the team-leading context appeared to be related to the leader's self-concept of 'being' a servant leader, understanding their authentic self, and having the confidence to be themselves (Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011). We hope that this finding can help build consensus among servant leadership scholars that a stronger focus on the leader development is needed to complement the budding work on skills-based leadership development (Eva & Sendjaya, 2013; Lemoine et al., 2021; Marks, 2015; Meuser & Smallfield, 2023).

Second, we advance the literature on mindfulness by furthering its applicability to be used in servant leader development. While current research on the systematic development of leaders through mindfulness interventions primarily focuses on improving the lives of those who are engaging in mindfulness practice themselves (in our case, the leader; Reb & Atkins, 2015; Urrila, 2022), our research offers a broader perspective by demonstrating that it can be used to foster certain leader development behaviors by providing leaders the motivation and capacity to engage in servant leadership (i.e., leader development) and tools to better engage in specific servant leadership behaviors (i.e., leadership development). Our study provides compelling evidence of how mindfulness training for leaders extends beyond individual gain (e.g., Badham & King, 2021), affecting both intra-individual development and fostering improved inter-individual dynamics. We have shown, for instance, how the leaders brought the newly-acquired mindfulness learning to benefit themselves and their followers, even when they did not have prior experience or a concrete idea of how mindfulness knowledge can be used in leadership work. Based on our study, leaders seem to view mindfulness as something concrete that they can apply in their day-to-day leadership practices to help team members unwind from work and improve their well-being and growth. We, therefore, argue that by examining the application of mindfulness at an inter-individual level (e.g., Reina et al., 2023) through a servant leadership lens, the caring attitude (Shapiro & Carlson, 2017) and mindful way of being and seeing associated with mindfulness (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2011) may be manifested as other-oriented leadership behaviors. Taken together, we provide empirical evidence that mindfulness learning, embedded in the social and interactional processes that occur in organizational contexts, may help leaders fulfill the expectation for good leadership and the leader's moral responsibility to care not just about their own work and life, but also those of others (Lemoine et al., 2019; Newstead et al., 2021).

Third, we challenge the notion of traditional leader development by demonstrating that mindfulness training can be used to grow the leader holistically by focusing on both (intra-individual) *leader* development and (inter-individual) *leadership* development (Day et al., 2021). As noted by Bragger et al. (2021), for servant leadership development to be effective, it needs to occur simultaneously at both the individual and collective levels, which aligns with leadership development models by Day and Dragoni (2015) and the findings of our study. Examining our findings from a *leader* development lens (Day, 2000), a key insight for most interviewed leaders was that to take care of others' needs, they first needed to meet their own, as they could not give from an empty cup (i.e., self-care). This builds on the importance for servant leaders to learn ways to replenish themselves to avoid mental fatigue, depletion and emotional exhaustion caused by regularly engaging in serving others (Liao et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2024). At an intra-individual level, an understanding of mindfulness develops the self and can provide leaders mental headspace, and a technique for "understanding the nature of our own minds and bodies, and for living life as if it really mattered." (Kabat-

Zinn, 2011, p. 284). More broadly, the findings suggest that mindfulness learning can also allow leaders to recover and replenish their energy to continue to engage in service, which is a finding consistent with the work recovery literature (Chan et al., 2022). Our study demonstrates that mindfulness training may allow leaders to reconceptualize their relationship with themselves, their workday, and their relationships with followers, to create a better balance to give them that space to engage in servant leadership. By reflecting on their work practices, the leaders were able to foster the self-awareness and self-care needed to develop more holistically as a leader to support others' well-being and growth (Sendjaya, 2015). Thus, we argue that leader mindfulness training and practice supported leaders to tap into the genuine willingness to support their followers instead of supporting followers because it was within their job description.

From a *leadership* development lens (Day, 2000), our study therein demonstrates that mindfulness training gives leaders tools to focus on the development and well-being of their followers, shifting the focus of development from the individual to the collective level (Badham & King, 2021). For instance, based on our findings, mindfulness training appeared to encourage leaders to focus on coaching their followers rather than monitoring their performance, a distinguisher between servant and non-servant leader behavior (Lemoine et al., 2021). In their study, Neubert et al. (2022) encourage promoting servant leadership at multiple levels, as it may be a critical mechanism to prevent group-level disrespect by promoting a virtuous team climate. Behaviors such as sharing vulnerabilities, which we detected, could cultivate trust and interconnectedness on multiple levels (Christensen-Salem et al., 2021). Aligned with the research on how servant leaders create a servant culture within their team (Liden et al., 2014b), our findings also show that mindfulness-trained leaders interested in the needs of their followers actively engage in team-level practices, such as encouraging collaboration and modeling positive behaviors (Liden et al., 2014b). Thus, the study demonstrated that there are trickle-down effects to servant leadership development to followers, even if they are not directly involved in the training.

Fourth, our study emphasizes that mindfulness interventions serve as an alternative means to develop leaders who genuinely want to put their followers first, without engaging in a formal leadership development training program. Mindfulness learning may be practically and experientially embedded in the continuous maturation and development behaviors of leaders (Wallace et al., 2021). Specifically, our findings support the view that the balanced development of an individual leader across the cognitive, emotional, spiritual, moral, and social domains is needed for effective servant leadership development (Bragger et al., 2021; Sendjaya, 2015). Adding to the limited understanding of the potential of mindfulness interventions to support leadership development (Reitz et al., 2020; Urrila & Mäkelä, 2022), we have provided important evidence of how mindfulness practice can help leaders *self*-develop their other-orientation through, for instance, enhancing their ability for self-reflection based on their attention to internal and external feedback, and managing and regulating their emotions and behaviors to improve relations with their followers (Nesbit, 2012). One of the key messages of this study is that mindfulness interventions in the context of workplace relationships, such as between leaders and followers, involves not only attending mindfulness training, but independent practice. Raising awareness of the self and others through mindfulness is a resource for leaders that can be developed outside the classroom environment, through formal and informal mindfulness practice, the latter known as a mindful way of being (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Our study has shown that leaders' mindfulness practice at work often takes the informal, 'off-the-meditation-seat' form, embedded in the leaders' perceptions, motivations, intentions, and actions, as leaders apply mindfulness to support and develop their followers. This insight is significant, as someone's ability to be mindful in relationships shows in how they act in real-life situations outside of the classroom.

5.2. Practical implications

Our study proposes mindfulness-based leader development is a holistic, continuous process that is launched by the formal program and that involves a fundamental shift in perspective for leaders to view their direct, moment-by-moment experience with greater clarity and objectivity, and capacity to take the perspective of another person (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Shapiro et al., 2006).

First, our study holds significance for individual leaders, and their followers and teams. We recommend including mindfulness interventions in servant leadership development programs (Pircher Verdorfer, 2016). Our study provides a credible indication that in the work context, mindfulness interventions can benefit employees across multiple levels within an organization, especially when role models, such as mindfulness-trained leaders with a servant mindset, share their learning and positive experiences of mindfulness with others. The more mindful members in a team, the more mindful the team. Thus, teams should engage in mindfulness practices and a mindful'way of being' together as a team, to collectively cultivate a caring and accepting culture. To cultivate a culture of servancy, it is important for leaders, and employees alike, to engage in mindful practices. There is now an abundance of apps (e.g., Insight Timer, UCLA Mindful) and websites (e.g., mindful.org) to assist with the process. The main thing to remember is not to set expectations for a specific outcome but instead intend to connect with yourself and others with an attitude of open, caring attention (Shapiro et al., 2018). Additionally, organizations should formally support team mindfulness–collective awareness of shared goals and well-being of each member; Reitz & Chaskalson, 2020)–through investing in team-level interventions that can mitigate team conflict and the detrimental consequences of social undermining, benefiting team dynamics (Yu & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018).

Second, our study provides valuable information for development professionals who are responsible for evaluating and selecting leadership training materials. An investment in mindfulness training for leaders is an investment in their entire organization. As demonstrated in the findings, mindfulness training creates a trickle-down effect, where leaders actively engage their followers in mindfulness practice. To make the most of what mindfulness interventions and practice have to offer for leadership, awareness of its benefits should be raised in organizations to address any skepticism. HR managers may communicate the empirical research on mindfulness practice as an impactful, holistic, and accessible leader self-development approach that can develop leadership in general, and servant leadership in particular by influencing how leaders think and feel about themselves and their followers, and change behaviors (Urrila, 2022).

Finally, our study has implications for mindfulness and leadership coaches. As our study indicates, mindfulness interventions provided by external mindfulness professionals have a crucial role in guiding organizational leaders and employees especially on how to incorporate mindfulness principles, practices, and attitudes into their everyday routines. The intended learning outcomes should involve not only conceptual understanding of mindfulness but also actively applying them in actions, behaviors, and thoughts, thereby embodying mindfulness in one's way of living and interacting with the world. Therefore, mindfulness training aimed for leader audiences as part of servant leadership development efforts, specifically, should be designed to strengthen leaders' abilities to support and develop their followers. Such training should contain leader-specific content, engage participants in self- and social awareness through self-reflection practices that strengthen the capacity for introspection, develop personal and relational skills overlooked by traditional leadership training, and help cultivate workplace attitudes such as acceptance and kindness (for guidelines see Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2022). Moreover, leader mindfulness training should be a forum to discuss leadership intentions, personal leadership philosophies, and be an incubator for positive leadership practices and other-oriented leadership behaviors. Importantly, to be able to make the connections to

leadership development, mindfulness coaches need to have sufficient knowledge of how mindfulness practices can assist in engaging in leadership, to be able to facilitate the interpersonal development of leader participants. In addition, it is suggested that leadership coaches need to integrate mindfulness into their coaching training and practice (Hall, 2015). The learnings might be applied in one-on-one or group settings through formal practices and inquiry.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Despite the many strengths of this research (such as pre- and post-intervention design, multi-channel qualitative material, and a large number of participants), we acknowledge some limitations. Based on the knowledge gained in this study, we also suggest multiple directions for future research.

First, as the follower-perspective seemed significant in many of the interviewed leaders' experiences, we framed this study with servant leadership instead of alternate leadership approaches. Before we made this choice, we examined the data for potential links to ethical, authentic and transformational leadership. Ethical leadership being characterized on leadership ethics, moral perspectives, and the correction or promotion of moral behavior by followers through reward and punishment (Al Halbusi et al., 2023), was not suitable as these themes were not emphasized in the interviewees' experiences. Authentic leadership is focused predominantly on the individual leader (Zheng et al., 2022), and while it does capture some of our self-awareness category, it does not capture the follower-perspective so significant in many of the interviewed leaders' experiences. Transformational leadership had some dimensions that came through the data such as individual consideration (Duan et al., 2022), but making links to other dimensions, such as inspirational motivation or idealized influence, would have been a misrepresentation of our findings. Further, the other-orientation that was developed and reported seemed to go beyond what is depicted in the transformational leadership literature and was more akin to servant leadership (van Dierendonck et al., 2014). In saying this, we acknowledge that there are debates about how distinct these different leadership approaches actually are and if non-academics can really tell the difference in practice (see Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Lemoine et al., 2019). However, we believe that the data better represented the theoretical unique elements of servant leadership, rather than the overlap inherent in these theories (Lemoine et al., 2019), and thus was most suitable for our analyses.

Second, this study revealed possible mechanisms of mindfulness training that could lead to beneficial outcomes, based on leaders' rich descriptions, but could not suggest causality or measure changes statistically. The issues of causality have been an ongoing concern in the servant leadership literature (Eva et al., 2019), and the leadership literature more broadly (Banks, 2023). To test a causal inference of mindfulness training on servant leader behavior, a difference-in-difference method can be used to compare a randomized treatment group that receives the mindfulness training with a comparable control group, who are similar in age, gender, experience, seniority, leadership ability, and performance (Antonakis et al., 2010). If it is plausible to assume that any difference between the treatment and control groups would remain stable over time without the mindfulness intervention, separating any differences during the pre-intervention data collection will allow the researcher to isolate the treatment effect (Lonati et al., 2018).

Third, the focus of this study was on the leaders' experiences of mindfulness training after the intervention. We addressed the longitudinal aspect of leader mindfulness training through references to the continuous nature of leader development through practicing mindfulness beyond the formal program, but longitudinal analysis was beyond the scope of this study. How the beneficial effects of mindfulness learning and practice are sustained long-term is an important aspect of mindfulness-based leader development (Urrila, 2022). Therefore, we recommend future qualitative intervention research to utilize rigorous longitudinal procedures, such as follow-up interviews, to openly investigate the long-term experiences of mindfulness intervention participants (Choi & Leroy, 2015; Davidson & Kazniak, 2015).

Fourth, we only interviewed leaders who went through one specific mindfulness intervention, and we did not collect data from other sources. While we were deliberate in our choice to interview only leaders, we acknowledge this can create concerns of self-source rating bias (De Haan et al., 2019). For future mindfulness interventions, we suggest broadening the subjects and the data collection methods to examine a broader picture of the effects of mindfulness intervention. This may include obtaining subjective data from multiple sources, including followers, managers, customers, and suppliers. An alternate method is social network analysis (see Maupin et al., 2023) which can be used to examine the network (team/team members) outcomes discussed in this study, such as collaboration behavior, mindfulness uptake, and supportive behaviors. Further, a rarely used objective measure in leadership development is Avolio et al.'s (2010) return on leadership development investment formula which could be used to analyze the cost of the mindfulness intervention, vis-a-vis traditional skill-based leadership development, and their relative impact on performance.

Fifth, the gender balance of our data is very skewed towards female participants (56 female, 6 male). There are several reasons for why we had a female-dominated sample. First, Organization B operated within a predominantly female-dominated field, resulting in an all-female subsample ($n = 22$). Second, this research was conducted in a country with strong female leadership representation, both in organizations and political leadership, being higher than the OECD average resulting in a larger pool of female leaders than other countries. Third, women in managerial and leadership roles may be more inclined toward self-development and participating in educational courses, including mindfulness programs, compared to their male counterparts (Zenger & Folkman, 2019). Fourth, mindfulness program participants (non-leadership) have skewed predominantly female, with *meta*-analyses reporting less than 30 % of male respondents (Bodenlos et al., 2017). This has led scholars to question if men are not partaking in mindfulness interventions due to threats to their masculinity and their perceived gender role (Carlson, 2018). Taken together, we agree with Carlson (2018) that examining the role of gender in both the uptake of mindfulness practice and the effectiveness of mindfulness practice is a fruitful avenue for research. In examining the servant leadership and gender literature, there is evidence to suggest that there is a performance advantage for women engaging in servant leadership (Lemoine & Blum, 2021). Thus, directly examining the effects of gender on the mindfulness and servant leadership relationship is a positive direction for future research. More broadly, further research needs to examine participants' demographics in leadership development, such as age, education, race, ability, and sexuality. This examination of identity is required across all elements of leader development, such as who self-selects or is selected into programs, the efficacy of the design of programs, and the impact of programs (i.e., attitudinal, behavioral and performance changes). As the majority of research on leader and leadership development still focuses on White male managers, mainly from the US, which does not reflect the modern workforce (Vogel et al., 2021), studies such as ours offer a small glimpse into how leader development occurs in a different sample than traditional studies.

6. Conclusion

We have demonstrated how a mindfulness intervention aimed at leaders can help them engage in servant leadership behaviors by integrating mindfulness knowledge and learning into their leadership, intending to benefit themselves, their followers, and their teams. We revealed that many leaders have the motivation to support their followers, but workable strategies and tools may not always be readily available. Leaders face several barriers that they need to circumvent to

implement an other-oriented leadership approach. We found that raising awareness of the self and others through mindfulness interventions and practice is a resource for leaders that helps them foster the self-care and growth needed to engage in supportive and caring behavior towards followers. Our study has led to the conclusion that a mindfulness intervention and practice can build leaders' capacity for servant leadership. We encourage organizational behavior scholars to continue the examination of mindfulness interventions for leadership development, as they offer valuable tools to respond to (albeit not remove) the challenges of modern organizations.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Laura Urrila: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. **Nathan Eva:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – review and editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114858.

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