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Original Article

Applying leadership coaching as an approach to support servant leader development in Cambodia

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Abstract

While leadership coaching has been applied in leader development, few studies have applied leadership coaching to servant leader development, and, to the best of our knowledge, none in Cambodia. This study explored how leadership coaching and Knowles' (2015) principles of andragogy can support servant leader development in a blended Cambodian course. Participatory Action Research was used to guide the design and evaluation of the course. The course included leadership coaching based on the GROW Model and servant leadership training informed by Knowles' andragogy principles. Data was collected through focus groups with 9 of 12 participants who were managers, teachers, or engineers in Cambodian non-government organisations, and it was found that the course design benefitted from Knowles' andragogy principles and that leadership coaching was perceived as valuable by the participants. The study also identified areas for improvement, such as the need for additional language support for Khmer learners and a more integrated approach to coaching and training. These findings add support to initiatives for cross-cultural servant leader development and suggest that servant leadership development programs in Cambodia can benefit from incorporating leadership coaching but must consider cultural context and language proficiency.

Keywords: Leadership coaching; GROW Model; servant leadership; andragogy; cross-cultural leader development

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Introduction

Cambodia is a developing nation in Southeast Asia that has made significant development progress in the past 30 years (World Bank, 2009). A contributing factor to this success has been the involvement of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) through economic, social, and educational development initiatives. A study by the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, a body of international and Cambodian NGOs, estimated that between 20% and 30% of the Cambodian population was directly impacted by NGO activity (Domashneva, 2013). The encouraging progress and need to reduce budgets because of COVID-19 encouraged many international NGOs to scale back their Cambodian operations (Chor, 2021) or replace existing leaders with new expatriates or local leaders. Both authors of this article were concerned that these developments could create a leadership void or capacity gap and sought to address this by offering capacity development for these new or aspiring leaders.

In keeping with the mission and values of the NGO sector, we focused on servant leadership, an others-first leadership theory proposed by Robert Greenleaf in *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf, 1970). While research has found that leadership coaching can effectively develop leaders (Bright & Crockett, 2012) and that servant leadership can develop through various methods and cultures (Rodríguez-Carvajal et al., 2014), no research has explored this intersection in a Cambodian NGO context. In contrast, research on leadership development in Cambodia has mostly focused on traditional top-down approaches (Min et al., 2022), so there is a limited understanding of how servant leadership principles resonate with Cambodian leaders and how best to cultivate them (Coggins, 2012). Furthermore, while leadership coaching is gaining traction globally (Lines & Evans, 2020), its use in Cambodia, particularly in conjunction with servant leadership development, remains unexplored. This lack of research on culturally appropriate methods for servant leadership development and coaching in Cambodia presents the two main problems addressed by this study.

To address these problems, our research question was:

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How can a blended learning approach incorporating leadership coaching based on the GROW Model and servant leadership training informed by Knowles' andragogy principles be effective for servant leader development in Cambodia?

This article explores our approach using Participatory Action Research to design and evaluate the course. While data were collected throughout the program, this article presents participant reflections on the program design and how this benefits from Knowles' andragogy principles. The article also explores areas for improvement, such as the need for additional language support for Khmer learners and better integration of coaching and training.

Literature review

Various pedagogical approaches have successfully been applied to servant leader development. This has included discussion-based pedagogies (Jenkins, 2013), service-learning (Kiersch & Peters, 2017; Marshall, 2008), experiential learning (Boyum, 2012; Eich, 2008; McCall, 2004), field placements (Fields et al., 2015), mentoring (Ashley, 2016), and volunteering (Russell, 2008). Servant leader development has been explored as a graduate outcome in university units (Anderson, 2009; Bommarito, 2012; Rohm, 2013) or as focused courses (Meinecke, 2014; Polley, 2020), outside the classroom (Noll, 2012), or in church-based seminars (Ashley, 2016; Griffin, 2012). Though not all studies found learners developed as servant leaders, the overall trend suggests that sound andragogy can support servant leader development.

Evidence also suggests that servant leadership is applicable across cultures. Studies have shown the relevance of servant leadership outside of the Anglosphere in Ghana (Hale & Fields, 2007), China (Sun & Wang, 2009), the Philippines (West et al., 2009), the Netherlands (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), Italy (Bobbio et al., 2012), Spain, Argentina, and Mexico (Rodríguez-Carvajal et al., 2014), and Portugal (de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014), to name a few. Furthermore, a cross-cultural study by Coggins (2012) of Khmer and American Evangelical Christians in Cambodia found that servant leadership had a generally positive relationship to psychological capital but was strongest in Cambodian participants. Despite limited research on servant leadership in Cambodia, the growing research on the relevance and success of servant leader development in other cultures suggests that servant leaders can develop and succeed in Cambodia.

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Although previous studies explored programmes that combined training and coaching (Bright & Crockett, 2012; Jones et al., 2006; Kochanowski et al., 2010; Nieminen et al., 2013), no study has explored if leadership coaching supports servant leader development, particularly within a Cambodian or NGO context. We drew on our qualifications and experience in coaching and training and earlier collaboration in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Polley, 2016) to propose a relevant programme for servant leader development in Cambodia. In support of this project, one author relocated to Cambodia while the other author offered online coaching from New Zealand.

Leadership coaching

Leadership coaching has grown in popularity since the 1990s, with numerous approaches and definitions now offered. The most relevant definition of leadership coaching adopted for this study is offered by Smith et al. (2009, p. 150), who defined coaching as a "facilitative or helping relationship to achieve some type of change, learning, or a new level of individual or organizational performance" yet noted how this differs from mentoring relationships by having a shorter duration and a specific focus. While our approach to coaching shared similarities with executive and business coaching (Grover & Furnham, 2016), most participants in this study were from non-business contexts or were not executives.

Earlier research on the application of coaching to support training found largely positive outcomes. A study conducted by Bright and Crockett (2012) involving 115 workers using classroom training and phone coaching found that learners who were also coached exhibited improved skills in problem-solving, handling criticism, and aspects of time management. In a field experiment involving supermarket managers where some received coaching and others did not, Kochanowski et al. (2010) also found in their surveys that collaboration with subordinates improved. However, in another study of 469 managers from a large government agency by Nieminen et al. (2013) using multisource feedback from peers, subordinates, and supervisors, there was little difference in development between learners who only did training and those who also had coaching. One exception was that self-ratings were higher for coached learners, suggesting coaching may have positive impacts on self-efficacy, but there is a need for further research to validate this. Our earlier experiences found that

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mentoring and faith communities shaped earlier servant leader development (Polley, 2020), suggesting that coaching relationships may exert a positive influence on servant-leader development in the classroom. While some research has explored coaching and servant leader development, further evidence is required to support this.

GROW Model

We applied the GROW Model to structure each of the coaching sessions, as this was a helpful and popular framework for new coaches and experienced coaches (Eastman, 2016). The GROW Model is an acronym proposed by Sir John Whitmore for *Goals*, *Reality*, *Options* (or *Obstacles*), and *Way Forward* (or *Will*). An explanation of these steps is given in Table 1.

Table 1. *GROW Model*

Process	**Description**
Goals	The desired 'end point' or objectives of the coaching session.
Reality	The perceived reality of the coachee including their context, challenge(s), and progress.
Options	The options or opportunities available to the coachee. Most of the coaching sessions are spent in this process.
Way Forward	The process the coachee will take to implement the 'option(s)'. This often includes the 'when,' 'who,' and 'will'.

Source: Adapted from Whitmore (2009)

Andragogy

Andragogy derives from the Greek words *andr*, meaning "man" and *agogos*, meaning "leader of" and refers to 'leading adults' through principles and methods of adult education in contrast to pedagogy ('leading of children'), which can explicitly refer to the teaching of children (Knowles et al., 2015). Knowles et al. (2015) proposed six principles of adult learning that were embodied in the course design (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Knowles' andragogical principles*

Principle	**Description and application**
Need to know	Adult learners must understand the training purpose. Our advertising and recruitment documentation outlined the course purpose and our course design invited learner contribution. Coaching sessions empowered learners to create and manage their development agenda.

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Foundation	Adult learners will reflect on prior experiences that inspire or hinder learning. Our coaching and training encouraged reflective discussion and practice and the co-construction of knowledge.
Self-concept	Adult learners are self-directed and should be given autonomy and voice in learning decisions. We captured weekly learner feedback and used this to guide course content and development.
Readiness	Adult learners must perceive training to be relevant. Our 'learner-centred' approach encouraged learners to identify, explore, and share learning relevant for their context and the class.
Motivation	Adult learning is problem-centred rather than content-oriented. Our feedback loops and use of the GROW Model helped ensure the programme was problem-centred and relevant.
Orientation	Adult learners are more likely to be internally motivated. This was reflected in the volunteer nature of the programme and participation in coaching and training sessions.

Source: Knowles et al. (2015)

Consistent with our earlier collaboration in tertiary-level leader development in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Polley, 2021), the approach was based on a social constructivist approach to education where knowledge is socially constructed based on the knowledge and experiences of learners (Hằng et al., 2015). To encourage a co-construction of meaning, learners were assigned individual book chapters, videos, and journal articles based on their English proficiency, cultural background, and academic ability, focusing on servant leadership theory, application, and research and leadership within Khmer culture. Learners then presented, discussed, debated, and reflected on their personal servant leadership experiences in their management, teaching, and engineering contexts in class discussions and small groups.

One factor that shaped course delivery was COVID-19. We planned for blended learning facilitated through a free Learning Management System, online coaching, and face-to-face delivery that used collaborative presentation software. However, COVID-19 restrictions meant training was mostly delivered online through video conferencing, and all coaching was conducted online. As these conditions were beyond our control, we made changes to accommodate these changes but recognised that these factors would impact training and coaching.

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Research methodology

Research design

The research methodology we applied was Participatory Action Research, as it encouraged a collaborative approach that harmonized with the nature of servant leadership which encourages collaboration between the leader and follower (Focht, 2011). Participatory Action Research has three pillars – participatory involvement 'with' participants not 'on' them as co-researchers (i.e., life in society); transformative action (i.e., experience); and emphasis on research and advancement of knowledge (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). The course design invited learners to share their servant leader development each week and present their personal leadership philosophy at the course conclusion. Learners were also encouraged to complete an anonymous survey after each module and coaching session on what they believed was positive, needed improvement, and what was learned. This evidence was made available to learners through dashboards and discussed during a weekly pre-meeting (from Weeks 1 to 4) and later within the classroom. Evidence was then analysed to identify key themes that guided three post-course focus groups centred around teachers, managers, and engineers that explored learner development and experiences.

Research participants

The study employed a convenience sampling method to recruit participants for *The Servant as Leader* course, which ran for 16 weeks. This method involved reaching out to a combination of Cambodian and expatriate business and community leaders. Invitations were posted in several Facebook groups and on three local international school forums to encourage diversity in religions, backgrounds, educational levels, and ethnicities. The course details clearly outlined the time commitment of 90-minute in-person (and later online) weekly training sessions and up to three individual executive online coaching sessions of 60 minutes. Learners were also encouraged to devote an additional three hours per week to self-paced learning. The course content was made available to learners beforehand through Microsoft OneNote to encourage preparation, collaboration, and informed group discussions.

The engagement process was successful in attracting a diverse group of 17 learners. Of these, approximately half of the learners were Khmer (9) with the

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remaining learners coming from the United States (5), the United Kingdom (2), and the Philippines (1). As many learners had limited Khmer, the training and coaching were in English to reduce language barriers, but with provisions made for Khmer learners by adapting the coaching and training for ESL learners. We believe that this approach was sound, as research by Cox (2012) reported positive results through coaching in a second language, and Motsoaledi and Cilliers (2011) found cross-cultural coaching feasible. We found that learners were predominantly professionals in the field of engineering (6), management (5), or teaching (4), and that many schools and ministries sought servant leader development for their Khmer staff and requested their inclusion. Of the 12 learners to complete the program, nine participated in one of the three post-course focus groups and had their statements shared in the findings. A summary of the participants is included in Table 3, and a breakdown of the interviewees is in Table 4.

Table 3. *Participants in the study*

Variable (bracketed figures are course completions)	**Male**	**Female**
Number of course participants		
Enrolled	9	8
Completed	8	4
Nationality of participants		
Cambodia	5 (5)	4 (2)
Philippines	-	1 (1)
United States	3 (2)	2 (1)
United Kingdom	1 (1)	1 (-)
Age of participants		
19-25	3 (3)	1 (-)
26-35	-	5 (4)
36-45	4 (3)	1 (-)
46-55	2 (2)	1 (-)
Religion of participants		
Christian	8 (7)	8 (4)
Other	1 (1)	-
Occupation of participants		
Manager	3 (3)	3 (1)
Teacher	2 (2)	3 (2)
Architect/Engineer	3 (3)	1 (1)
Other	1 (-)	1 (-)
Highest level of education		
Secondary school	-	1 (-)
Undergraduate degree	5 (4)	4 (3)
Postgraduate degree	4 (4)	3 (1)

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Table 4. *Interviewee characteristics*

Interviewee	Gender	Nationality	Age	Religion	Occupation	Education
Sam	Male	Cambodia	36-45	Christian	Manager	Undergraduate
Liam	Male	Cambodia	19-25	Christian	Architect/ Engineer	Undergraduate
Matt	Male	United Kingdom	36-45	Christian	Teacher	Postgraduate
Kim	Male	Cambodia	46-55	Buddhist	Manager	Postgraduate
Chester	Male	United States	46-55	Christian	Manager	Postgraduate
Ben	Male	United States	36-45	Christian	Teacher	Postgraduate
Rodney	Male	Cambodia	19-25	Christian	Architect/ Engineer	Undergraduate
Adeline	Female	United States	36-45	Christian	Architect/ Engineer	Postgraduate
Sandra	Female	Cambodia	26-35	Christian	Manager	Undergraduate

Data collection

The study employed a qualitative data collection method using two focus groups of four and five participants lasting 90 minutes with informal support from surveys to assess program effectiveness and explore participant experiences. The Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale by Senjaya et al. (2008) served as the foundation for the teaching/learning framework and the pre- and post-course survey which were administered in Week 1 and Week 16 to highlight potential areas of development and then discussed during the focus groups. Our choice to emphasise qualitative rather than quantitative research reflected our intent to explore the learner journey of the servant leader in Cambodia and our concern in trying to quantify leader development immediately after the training and during COVID-19 lockdowns which could limit learners' ability to fully apply their learning.

Data analysis

Data from the focus groups was analysed using thematic analysis to explore participants' learning experiences. This occurred by recording, transcribing, and coding the anonymised findings and identifying key themes and trends. Our inductive approach used focus groups where participants were encouraged to discuss areas that they perceived as developed, relate this to the surveys, and identify how they believed that coaching and training shaped this

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development. Where possible, we asked participants to validate their responses by triangulating with other data or events within the course. We assigned participants pseudonyms after the interview to ensure data confidentiality and used their statements in the findings to authentically reflect their thoughts and beliefs.

Findings

Findings have been divided into the emergent categories of andragogy, leadership coaching, and cross-cultural leader development based on our analysis of the data.

Andragogy

All participants believed that the course and its design helped their development as servant leaders as it introduced leadership ideas and concepts, emphasised the value of service, and helped learners express themselves more authentically in their interpersonal relationships. For many, this extended their previous leadership experiences or leadership knowledge. As Sam shared:

> *I feel I developed as a servant leader. Before I joined the class, I didn't know what 'servant leadership' [meant]… I discovered leadership is not just about asking people to do something, but it's serving other people too. So, it helped me change the way I am thinking [to be more authentic], and I am working with my team at work… It reminds me of when I worked with my team on the [earlier] lessons* (June 7, 2021).

A work team that took the course found that it gave them a shared language to discuss leadership and personal values. It also instilled a desire to serve and share this experience and learning with others. As Adeline shared:

> *I'm hopeful the discussion groups we're working on will [impact others in the office] so we can help bring some of that common vocabulary into the wider office as well… [These groups] will continue to spark conversations on what we are learning, and this will continue the conversation* (June 26, 2021).

Learners consistently spoke of how their learning and leadership were challenged by the COVID-19 lockdowns that occurred during the course. This created fewer opportunities to engage with others or to exhibit servant leadership. As Liam shared:

> *For almost half the course, I was working online. [Although I feel] I've shown more initiative in… taking the lead… I'm not sure how well I can express [my development*

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> *as a servant leader to others] or how I can find opportunities to express service… where I serve and make people better* (June 26, 2021).

Learner feedback was mostly positive. Learners agreed that the content was organised, applicable, and holistic in exploring servant leadership. The presentation of different readings by learners encouraged class discussion and helped construct a shared understanding of servant leadership. As Matt shared:

> *I like the idea [of the course design]. It would have been very easy to have a series of slides… but it was nice to hear what other people had [read]… That was very positive. What you find in school [from my experience] is that when you open up to questions, you must repeat the question and sometimes it leaves that open to different interpretations. [It can be hard] if people have a different understanding of the question because there are lots of people who bring different things. This can make it [more disjoined] than if you sat down and pulled the slides together and said "This is what we do"* (June 7, 2021).

Matt and other teachers noted how learner presentations and small group discussions were organic, supportive, and aligned with the concept of servant leadership, although Kim shared:

> *The small groups stayed the same. Maybe it's also good [to change these around]. It meant participants got to know each other very well. But, I don't know if we really got to learn about others* (June 7, 2021).

Learners also noted how the number of presentations delivered each week limited discussion time, and because the language, concepts, and perspectives of servant leadership were less familiar to Khmer learners, it made it more difficult to quickly learn. Sandra asked:

> *Could you extend the period of the classes? Then we can be more open and give more time for discussion… [so we have] enough time as a group to work on some things together. Many of us who are Khmer need more time to learn from other perspectives and leaderships* (June 7, 2021).

Although all learners believed that the presentations and discussions were effective in creating class engagement and facilitating learning, more time must be allocated to class discussion and engagement.

Leadership coaching

All learners believed that leadership coaching and coach support were beneficial in their servant-leader development. Most learners had two or three coaching sessions of an hour or more that worked through personal and

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leadership issues, provided tools, and reinforced servant leadership training. As Chester noted:

> *These meetings with [the coach] really helped me focus and gave me some tools to grow in that area… [Coaching] was good. I enjoyed meeting my [coach]. She had some really good ideas and really good things to implement, and so I think it did help a lot* (June 26, 2021).

Factors that contributed to coaching success included the coach's proficiency and professionalism in listening, asking questions, and providing feedback. Most learners noted how the coach was patient, affable, and helpful, although several learners felt the coach-coachee relationship positioned the coach as an authority rather than a peer, particularly if 'homework' was involved. For Adeline, this seemed:

> *More driven by the coach and what they want to talk about, I felt at times that she was trying to take me places that I wasn't like ready to go* (June 26, 2021).

This perspective was expressed most prevalently among learners who had earlier or differing experiences of coaching. For most learners, coaching was a new concept and the course introduced them to the coaching concept. As Matt shared:

> *I haven't done… coaching before. Is it a self-help? Is it a health thing? Or, are we looking at me and my job? Having questions or a framework for people like me… would be helpful so we know [what to expect] as we can go off on a tangent. Maybe that's OK, but having a [clear structure] you can follow to start with would have been helpful* (June 7, 2021).

Prior exposure to coaching shaped learners' coaching expectations and how they believed coaching should be conducted. For some, this is also linked to their worldview. As Ben shared:

> *I think the idea of combining this course with coaching is exceptional. The one concern with [coaching that I had] was that [the coach] wasn't Christ-centred… I kind of had to blow off [some of the Hindu beliefs] because that's not my theology* (June 7, 2021).

Coaching online and across time zones made coordination challenging. Several learners felt they were 'not awake' in early morning coaching sessions and believed this impacted coaching effectiveness or clashed with other commitments. Most learners observed that separating coaching and training prevented them from being coordinated. Chester noted:

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> *It would have been better to [have] more… coordination… [as it] did seem a bit disjointed. [Coaching and training are] both good in their own right, but the fact they are being offered as a package made it feel a little bit separated… So, I think… [it would be good] to offer different perspectives but be more complimentary* (June 26, 2021).

Several learners recommended including the coach in the classes – at least at strategic times. As Matt shared:

> *Having someone who's part of the class within the country and involved in my life would help [with my coaching]... Even if [the coach] came to a couple of sessions [relevant to] their part of the group [so I can] remember who they are… If you could link [coaching and training] in your mind more, then maybe better coordination would have happened* (June 7, 2021).

Other learners also suggested peer and group coaching as strategies to integrate coaching and training. While coaching was perceived to be beneficial, coaching would be enhanced if the concepts were more clearly articulated to learners and more coordinated with training.

Cross-cultural leader development

Servant leadership, as articulated by Greenleaf, is relatively new to Cambodia. Yet Cambodian learners recognised and shared cultural similarities with, or examples of servant leadership, in Khmer stories and proverbs. All learners noted how integrating Khmer culture within lessons helped link theory to 'real life' and facilitate servant leader development. As a Cambodian learner, Rodney shared:

> *I would like you to continue… including Khmer proverbs. They're challenges [on how] we can do this in Cambodian culture… The concept might come from a different country but the way we reflect it in Cambodian culture is there [and] the issues we face in Cambodia. This is helpful* (June 26, 2021).

Several learners also noted how the course helped broaden their cross-cultural awareness and understanding of the Khmer worldview. Ben shared how:

> *From an educator's perspective, it is important we introduce students to new cultures, ideas, and perspectives… [Learning is] all about worldview development… and as we're learning, we're integrating that into our developing and expanding worldview… I think that was one of the best aspects of the course. As a white guy from the US who has been [in Cambodia] for 11 years, I enjoyed listening to Cambodians speak about servant leadership from their history and perspective. It was humbling and reminded me how much I really don't know about their culture. I thought that was extremely valuable* (June 7, 2021).

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Though some provision was made to cater fo Khmer learners, further support is required. As most servant leadership material is in English, it was difficult for English as a Foreign Language learners to understand. Sandra shared how:

> *Sometimes I struggled with the [teaching] approach… The readings are quite hard [and] sometimes I had to ask my [American] colleagues or partners to help me understand what it means. That part makes it challenging… I also noticed some foreign classmates speak very fast. They make good points, but sometimes it's hard to catch the point of what they are saying. I don't know if they forgot that there are Cambodians in the class and that our English levels are different* (June 7, 2021).

Cambodian learners also noted how understanding improved when further scaffolding was given to assigned articles or when videos were used. Matt summarised:

> *I think as the weeks went on, we found a class rhythm and were able to move through the material and gradually build our understanding… Having quite a strong set of ESL learners and native speakers… [meant]… we were a little shell shocked at the beginning. As it went on, we began to work together more, and I think that was really positive* (June 7, 2021).

While Cambodian learners enjoyed the integration of Khmer culture, they emphasised the need for more language and technology support in future programmes.

Discussion

The following section discusses and recommends our findings to support further servant-leader development within Cambodia.

Andragogy

Application of Knowles' (2015) andragogical principles strengthened the course design, and our experience largely supported these. Applicants attracted to the programme were self-motivated and believed the programme was relevant to their immediate or perceived future careers (several learners applied and were accepted for senior management roles and attributed this to the programme). Consistent with earlier research (Polley, 2020), learners drew extensively from earlier or other leadership experiences in school, church, work, or community contexts in their servant leader development. Some learners also took the initiative to create further learning communities in the workplace to apply and learn from their leadership experiences. Future courses using coaching and/or

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training may be enhanced by identifying and integrating these activities into the learner journey.

Our findings showed that reciprocal learning, where the teacher and students build a shared understanding, is beneficial within a Cambodian and adult learning context. This reflects our earlier research in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Polley, 2020, 2021). Educators in the programme believed that this approach harmonised with the nature of servant leadership as it encouraged and empowered others to contribute to the class learning and helped foster a sense of openness and authenticity within the classroom. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, further research may explore how this approach to andragogy could facilitate or support the concept of the *Servant Teacher* as outlined by Hays (2008).

An important consideration in future programmes is the learning barriers presented by language. Unlike our previous research where all learners were proficient in one language (Polley, 2021), this study showed how language proficiency is important when planning and delivering content. This may be important for future Cambodian servant leader courses since we found this programme strongly appealing to Christians and Christian leaders who often had limited proficiency in either English or Khmer. Learners believed that including a glossary; translating texts to a shared language; and spending more time reviewing terms, concepts, and theories before learners are assigned readings could address this.

Online delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic was noted to impact engagement and achievement (Cifuentes-Faura et al., 2021; Mahyoob, 2020), including in Cambodia (Chet et al., 2022; Heng et al., 2023). Learners in this study also believed that their development was negatively impacted by online learning, but there were no summative assessments or baselines to measure this impact. Feedback suggests the small groups helped offset this by developing interpersonal relationships within the classroom, but future programmes should consider rotating, enlarging, or strengthening these so learners can develop relationships with all class members.

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Leadership coaching

Our findings emphasised the practical considerations required when using leadership coaching. Although the GROW Model is a popular coaching framework (Cox, 2012; Herd, 2015), this study found that the model still requires sufficient scaffolding so learners understand how coaching works and have clear expectations of themselves and the coach. Our findings support earlier work by Cox (2012) and Motsoaledi and Cilliers (2011) which found that cross-cultural coaching was beneficial and could improve leader self-efficacy (Nieminen et al., 2013). Our findings also echoed earlier research (Ermeling et al., 2015) showing that coaching was negatively impacted through the physical separation of coaches and coachees. Although some authors have suggested that online coaching can work effectively across time zones (Kanatouri, 2020), learners in this study found synchronous coaching difficult. These results were not surprising to us and reflected our pragmatic approach to the COVID-19 conditions. As with some earlier studies, participants believed that peer coaching or group coaching could improve leadership outcomes (Armstrong et al., 2013; Fettig & Artman-Meeker, 2016), but some studies reported little difference in leadership competencies or behaviours from individual and group coaching (Williams & Lowman, 2018), while other studies found that individual coaching was more effective than peer or group coaching (Lösch et al., 2016). A better solution may be to integrate various coaching approaches and apply the GROUP Model – a revised GROW Model for group coaching (Brown & Grant, 2010), but this could not verify this. We recommend that future programmes strengthen coaching integration in training using various coaching approaches and facilitate face-to-face coaching at times convenient for both coaches and coachees.

Cross-cultural leader development

Our study revealed several areas for future cross-cultural improvements. Like Salomaa (2015), we found coaching and training beneficial when facilitators possessed relevant cultural experience. As we were 'new' to Khmer culture, our use of cross-cultural dialogue that explored and celebrated cultural diversity was perceived well by expatriate and local learners. Linking servant leadership concepts to Khmer culture was important as Kimura (2007, p. 12) found that Cambodian culture was hierarchical with high power distance and that "followers tend to disrespect and even abuse leadership that is too soft or

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weak" – suggesting that servant leadership ideas may be different or even contrary to Cambodian culture. As Cambodia saw significant economic and social development in the past 20 years, the culture has experienced cultural globalisation through interactions with different information, people, and cultural practices (Eriksen, 2021). While our study encouraged cross-cultural discussions on servant leadership and linked to similar Cambodian concepts, it is unclear if these classroom discussions created change that was expressed in the workplace and what the strength of this relationship was. We recommend that future programmes encourage dialogue on learners' culture and context and extend study times to better allow for the assimilation of cultural understanding.

Conclusion and implications

This study has explored servant leadership development in Cambodia, primarily within a faith-based NGO setting. The findings highlight the relevance of servant leadership for Cambodian leaders but emphasise the need for cultural sensitivity and adaptation. Incorporating leadership coaching through a structured model like the GROW Model can provide valuable support for learners as they internalise servant leadership principles and develop action plans, particularly when there is strong integration between coaching and training and opportunities for workplace application. Similar leadership programs can benefit from additional language support for Khmer learners through translated materials, Khmer case studies, or forms of translation.

These findings also hold relevance for servant leader development beyond Cambodia. The importance of cultural sensitivity in servant leader development is well-documented (Chavez, 2011; de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014; Hale & Fields, 2007; Molnar, 2007; Sun & Wang, 2009), as is the need for language support for non-native English speakers (Roberts, 2021). While further research is needed on adapting coaching for diverse cultural contexts, this study suggests that coaching can be a valuable tool for servant leader development even where English is not the primary language.

The study acknowledges limitations in its generalisability due to the small sample population. Future research could extend the study to better represent the Cambodian population by including a broader range of leaders and

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organisations outside the NGO sector and with more diverse religious and educational backgrounds. Future research could also collect and analyse longitudinal data to determine the long-term impact of the programme and the effectiveness of coaching and training integration on servant leader development.

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Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Statements

This study was conducted following the ethics requirements of the Kingdom of Cambodia. Information in this study remained confidential and was restricted to the research team. To protect the participant's identity, names in this article are pseudonyms. All researchers in this study were volunteers and did not receive payments or benefits for their contribution to this research.

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