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# A Pragmatic Healer With Deception: A Qualitative Study of Servant Leaders

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## Abstract

Servant Leadership style is characterized by truthfulness, and emotional healing. One may expect that individuals with such behavioral characteristics shall be straight forward and will not indulge in deception. However, studies show that deception is an important ingredient of social interaction and influence strategy. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine how organizational processes demand servant leaders to use deception and explore empirically how servant leaders employ deception in their day-to-day life. The study employs Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis method to explore the lived experiences of the senior executives from various sectors. While the characteristics of their consciousness continues to remain rooted in truthfulness, and concern for the subordinates. The participants faced complex situations at workplace, which made the use of deception inevitable. The participants used deception in diverse forms, such as creating fae, portraying themselves as strict. This study adds a degree of pragmatism to servant leadership style. Findings shows that servant leadership style is not an idealistic attitude but a pragmatic leadership style that not always compromise personal interests to fulfill the interests of others, but acts pragmatically according to the situation.

**Keywords:** Deception, Emotional Healing, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Pragmatism, Servant Leadership.

## 1 Introduction

Leadership is a complex task. Effectiveness of social interaction and influence is crucial to leaders' success. (Samoilenko, 2017; Mukhtar, M., Risnita, & Prasetyo, 2020; Luthra, & Dahiya 2015; Wikaningrum, & Yuniawan, 2018). In general, the content of most of the social interactions is assumed to be truthful. However in reality, truthfulness is only one of many approaches to achieve the satisfactory interaction (Samoilenko, 2017). Often deception creeps in social interaction and influence based relationships (Samoilenko, 2017; Lindsey, Dunbar, & Russell, 2011) Deception occurs when an individual conveys information to another with the purposeful intent to mislead and misrepresent the emotions, intentions and motives. It may take many forms, ranging from outright falsification to equivocation and evasion (Buller & Burgoon, 1994). Studies also show that deception is essential for human survival. Ability to deceive successfully is considered as

an appropriate strategy for a successful social interaction (Samoilenko, 2017; Lindsey, Dunbar, & Russell, 2011; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2017) Effective leaders use deception in diverse ways. (Samoilenko, 2017; Chelliah & Swamy 2018; Dunbar, et al 2014; Pech & Stamboulidis, 2010; Xu, & Schriesheim, 2018). Organizations also use the art of manipulation to exaggerate their environmental efforts so as to deceive their stakeholders (Hidayatullah, 2023).

Recently Servant Leadership style has attracted considerable attention owing to its focus on healing the emotions of followers, their aspirations and empowering them to grow (Wheeler, 2011; Jit., Sharma., & Kawatra., 2017). Servant leaders empower and develop their subordinates through their virtue of emotional healing. Their unique orientation towards emotional healing can be associated with their characteristics of listening, empathy and compassion (Jit., Sharma., & Kawatra., 2017). Servant leaders also enhance job performance through their compassionate approach towards their followers (Bano, & Zehri, 2023). It is a follower centric style and characterized by a strong desire to serve the highest priority need of his/her followers (Coetzer, Bussin, & Geldenhuys. 2017). It is featured is by qualities such as empathy, good listening and persuasive skills (Spears, 2010). In addition it is imbued with spiritual orientation (Sendjaya & Cooper 2011; Khan, Khan, & Chaudhry, 2015; Williams, Brandon, Hayek, Haden, & Atinc 2017) focusing on elements of forgiveness, compassion and truthfulness (Van Dierendonck, & Patterson 2015; Gunn, 2002; Ahmad, Islam, D'Cruz, Noronha, 2021; Patterson 2003). Apart from truthfulness, servant leaders are characterized by honesty and kindness (Lumpkin, 2023). The spiritual orientation and employee centric attitudes of servant leaders can be helpful in spiritual development of the employees. Studies show that organizations that help the employees to grow spiritually perform better than others (Kumar et. al 2022). However, leadership function by definition involves social interaction as well as dynamics of influencing behavior of subordinates. Despite numerous of empirical works in the field of servant leadership and usage of deception at workplace; no attention has been paid to the usage of deception by servant leaders. It would therefore be of much interest to examine and understand whether servant leaders with the elements of virtuous behaviors employ deception while discharging their function of influencing subordinates Therefore present study is an attempt to examine how workplace human processes demand servant leaders to use deception and find/explore empirically how servant leaders employ deception in their day to day life.

While servant leadership style is characterized by positive behavioral attributes such as truthfulness, and empathy; the characteristics of the workplace places a dramatically opposite demand requiring the employment of deception. Studies show, the realities of workplace, pressured by hierarchical relations, politics, the struggle for influence are so structured that all superior-subordinate relations involve power dynamics that unfold in such a way that influences the nature social interaction (Lindsey, Dunbar, & Russell, 2011; Alapo, 2018; Hornung, & Höge, 2021). Presence of power differences and consequent politics makes the use of deception as an essential influencing strategy inevitable. Deception is consistent with positional power and is used by people with high and low power in various ways. (Xu & Schriesheim, 2018; Lindsey, Dunbar, & Russell, 2011; Samoilenko, 2017; Dunbar, et al 2014). Managers indulge in deception by concealing or manipulating certain facts and information that might weaken their position of power, managers use deception to influence their subordinates through power (Lindsey, Dunbar, & Russell, 2011; Xu & Schriesheim 2018).

Organizations are goal oriented; human and material resources have to be utilized in a way that contributes towards the achievement of organizational goals. However, unintentional deviations from organizational expectations might occur that can result in adverse organizational consequences that hinder the achievement of organizational goals. Such deviations/mistakes are pervasive in nature and can exist at all levels of the organizations. (Edmondson & Verdin 2018; Guchait, Zhao, Madera Hua & Okumus, 2018; Lei, Naveh, & Novikov, 2016). Therefore, successful management of such deviations/errors is crucial to the organizational success. (Guchait, Zhao, Madera Hua & Okumus, 2018; Lei, Naveh, & Novikov, 2016). To manage such deviations/errors; organizations frame policies and create practices that can detect and prevent these deviations (Guchait, Zhao, Madera Hua & Okumus, 2018; Farnese, Zaghini Caruso, Fida, Romagnoli & Sili 2019). Leaders are required to play a significant role in deviation management process. (Farnese, Zaghini Caruso, Fida, Romagnoli & Sili 2019). The leadership style for this purpose could be punitive, transactional or transformative or forgiveness oriented. The forgiveness and compassion oriented style that is servant leadership (Van Dierendonck, & Patterson 2015) is fraught with a risk of being misinterpreted as weak authority as the virtue of forgiveness may be perceived as weakness (McFarland, Smith, Toussaint, Thomas 2012; L'Hôte 2010; Murphy 1988; Fitzgibbons 1986). It may be conjectured that strong hierarchical positions and its validation may demand creation of facades and deception. Studies show that the element of compassion plays a significant role in pro-social lying: considered as deception that is intended to benefit others and protect them from emotional harm (Lupoli, Jampol, Oveis 2017; Levine & Lupoli, 2021).

Evidence shows that workplace offences are on rise (Okimoto, & Wenzel 2014; Dahiya & Rangnekar, 2019). Employees become vulnerable to workplace offences and also become self-serving and careless. These offences termed as workplace transgression have adverse consequences at organizational as well as individual levels; at organizational level workplace transgression leads to decrease in profitability and give rise to toxic work environment (Dahiya & Rangnekar, 2019). At individual level it can hamper the well-being of the employees (Struthers, Dupuis, & Eaton 2005). These workplace offences are a form of deviant behavior at workplace that includes activities such as theft and abuse; these behaviors are linked with enormous emotional as well as financial costs for the organizations (Jain & Sharma 2020). Owing to such adverse consequences, it becomes necessary to take remedial actions against workplace transgressions. Studies show that forgiveness can reduce the negative consequences of workplace transgressions (Struthers, Dupuis, & Eaton 2005; Sharma & Jit 2013; Dahiya & Rangnekar, 2019). Servant leadership also has an element of forgiveness (Gunn 2002; Van Dierendonck, & Patterson 2015). Therefore, servant leaders can minimize the negative consequences of workplace transgressions.

Employees work in organizations with a motive to fulfill their interests (Kaur 2014). However, due to scarce resources,

differences in value system, power, and poor communication; employees may perceive that their interests are being hampered by others, leading to conflicts at workplace (Kay & Skarlicki 2020; Kaur 2014; Longe 2015). Conflict is ubiquitous to workplace (Kay & Skarlicki 2020) and can lead to unfavorable consequences such as low productivity and satisfaction (Kay & Skarlicki 2020; Kaur 2014; Longe 2015), increase in employee turnover (Kaur 2014; Lim & Yazdanifard, R. 2012). Consequently, efficient conflict management approach is essential for the overall functioning of the organizations (Longe 2015). Studies show that deception is a useful conflict resolution strategy (Samoilenko, 2017; Sakina & Malik 2018). Different conflict management styles namely competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating and compromising (Kilmann & Thomas 1975) can also be deceptive. The parties experiencing conflict may pretend to have resolved the conflict, but the conflict is resolved only at superficial level. Usage of deception in conflict management can minimize the unpleasant outcomes resulting from conflict (Sakina & Malik 2018). Interestingly presenting information in a deceptive manner is useful to resolve conflicts (Samoilenko, 2017). It should be of much interest to examine whether servant leaders employ deception in the process of dealing with workplace conflicts.

Reality of workplace power relations and ideals of compassion and truthfulness places a unique and contradictory demand of reconciling these two dispositional roles, in which servant leaders, hypothetically speaking, have resort to deception. Therefore, it can be inferred that in spite of Servant Leaders' focus on emotional healing and empowerment of subordinates, there exists power dynamics and pressure of deviation management/mistake management; that involves the usage of deception. However, there is hardly any research on how leaders with different leadership styles employ deception. The present study attempts to fill the gap by investigating how servant leaders employ deception at workplace in order to get positive organizational outcome.

The presence of various organizational challenges makes deception an inevitable strategy; deception is pervasive to workplace. The nature of deception appears contrary to that of servant leadership style. Being a service oriented and follower centric leadership style with the virtues of compassion and trust; the usage of deception may create a dilemma for the servant leaders. The employment of deception by servant leaders can be challenging because of inconsistency in the nature of deception and the fundamental features of servant leadership style. Servant leadership style is characterized by forgiveness; the virtue of forgiveness and compassionate love comes naturally to a person who is a servant leader from heart (Patterson 2003; Caldwell & Dixon 2010; Van Dierendonck & Patterson 2015). However, studies show that forgiveness can be considered as a weakness; (McFarland, Smith, Toussaint, Thomas 2012; L'Hôte 2010; Murphy 1988; Fitzgibbons 1986). There are some kinds of people who lie outside the realm of forgiveness, for whom forgiveness is practically not possible; delinquents and sociopaths come under this category (Blumoff, 2006). Studies show that the act of forgiveness involves the feeling of powerlessness; especially when the person forgives other out of the sense of duty or out of the fear of retribution, forgiveness may give rise to the feeling of low self-worth in the forgiver. Forgiving gesture may be considered as an easy way to avoid the risk of expressing anger towards the offender (De Smet, R. A. 2007; Romig & Veenstra 1998). Also it has been found that in a hostile social environment, forgiving individuals are perceived as a weak and are accorded a lower social status (McFarland, Smith, Toussaint, Thomas 2012; L'Hôte 2010). Forgiveness may be viewed as a sign of weakness that encourages others to prey on the forgiver (Anderson 1999). Working in such cultural environment can be challenging for a true servant leader as the trait of forgiveness can be perceived as a sign of weakness and lower social status by the followers. Therefore, servant leaders might resort to deception so as to deal with situational challenges. They may display a retributive, authoritarian disposition as a façade.

Aggressive behavior is observed at workplace. It may emanate from factors such as personal dispositions, negative affect and interpersonal conflicts (Hershcovis, Turner, Barling, Arnold, Dupré, Inness & Sivanathan. 2007; Snyder, Chen, Grubb, Roberts, Sauter, & Swanson, 2004). Leaders play important role in dealing with aggressive behavior at workplace; they might also create a façade of strictness or pro-social lying or initiative punitive action. A feature of servant leadership style is compassion (Van Dierendonck, & Patterson 2015; Gunn, 2002). However, there is evidence to show that perceived compassion may decrease trust in situations where the act of compassion may be in conflict with integrity; as a result of which compassion leads to decline in trust (Lupoli, Zhang, Yin & Oveis, 2020). Dealing with scenarios where compassion may lead to reduction in trust levels could therefore be challenging which is akin to facing a dilemma which servant leaders must resolve or dissolve. Leaders might face a dilemma of either being honest by telling the truth or tell a lie so as to help an individual. This is an ethical dilemma between two conflicting moral values of honesty that might harm someone and helping behavior that involves telling a (pro-social) lie, which is a form of deception. In such circumstances the virtue of compassion will let the individual dissolve the dilemma by telling a pro-social lie. (Lupoli, Jampol, Oveis 2017).

## 2 Significance of the study

The analysis of the available literature thus shows that deception is an inevitable strategy to deal with various workplace challenges. However, the nature of deception is contrary to the characteristics of Servant Leadership style. The available literature lacks studies which shed light on how servant leaders employ deception in spite of their style being characterized by emotional healing, compassion forgiveness and truthfulness. Therefore, the present study can be a valuable contribution towards understanding how servant leaders resort to deception and resolve or dissolve the dilemma posited by compulsions of organizational dynamics (demanding employment of deception) as described above. The present study can be helpful in understanding servant leadership style from a new perspective. Since this area of research is unexplored, the present study can be a base for further research in the field of deception; a strategy that can be beneficial for all stakeholders. The present study attempts to answer following research questions:

Research Question 1: In what form(s) do Servant Leaders employ deception at workplace?

Research Question 2: How do Servant Leaders dissolve/resolve the dilemma that arises due to the usage of deception and maintain their basic nature of being truthful, forgiving and compassionate?

### 3 Method

Present study adopts qualitative research approach as there is no theory of the subject being examined. Within the domain of qualitative research, the study employs Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA focuses on analyzing the 'lived experiences' and captures the 'essential characteristics of consciousness' (Smith 1999). The IPA method helps to examine how participants make sense of their own major life experiences (Smith., Flowers & Larkin 2009). Since the objective of the study is to explore how servant leaders employ deception and resolve their dilemma, the research method should permit capturing the lived experiences of the participants and also provide the insight into the essential characteristics of their consciousness apart from assisting in analyzing their thought process, goals, values, methods, feelings, perceptions and judgments. These methodological demands are fulfilled by IPA (Smith 1999). The IPA technique is a participant-oriented approach, it allows the participants to express their lived experiences, the way they see it without any distortion (Alase 2017). The process of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, permits gaining an understanding of the meaning assigned by participant to their experiences and highlight their significance from their point of view. (Larkin & Thompson 2012). Within the IPA method, the researchers chose the method of in-depth interviews; these interviews are also termed as "purposeful conversation", wherein the purpose of the interview is communicated to the participants. The purpose of the interview is largely to facilitate the flow of conversation and permit the participants to express their thoughts, perspectives, opinions, and experiences in their own way. Since it is usually not helpful to ask the research questions directly to the participants, the interview questions are designed in a way that pitches the research questions at an abstract level and facilitates the flow of conversation in a way that helps the researchers to answer the research questions (Smith., Flowers & Larkin 2009). Researchers communicated the purpose of the interview to the participants. Present study is conducted in accordance with the general guidelines in psychology. The participants of the present study were informed about the purpose of the research. The researchers have also maintained the confidentiality of the information provided by the participants.

### 4 Sampling and Data Collection

Since the impact of leadership style of senior executive can cascade downward to the organizational hierarchy (Wang Xu, & Liu 2018). Therefore, it was decided to sample subjects from senior executives. For data collection BSE 200 companies were selected and attempts were made to contact them for participation in the study through emails and telephone calls. Personal contacts were also used wherever it was necessary. Since the selection of fully random sample was not possible, attempts were made to make the sample as close to random as possible. 34 companies agreed to participate in the research. The next step in the data collection process was identification of servant leaders. For this purpose, the researchers distributed the instrument developed by Reed, Vidaver-Cohen & Colwell (2011) among 240 immediate reporting and 240 next reporting subordinates of 48 senior executives (5 immediate reporting and 5 next reporting of each executive). Executive Servant Leadership Scale (ESLS) is specifically designed for senior executives. It measures the subordinates' perception towards their senior executive. It is a 25 item 4-point likert scale. Scores of this scale was calculated so as to identify the servant leaders. Further in the identification process the researchers also undertook personal interviews of present and past subordinates and colleagues of the senior executives. These interview questions were based on Barbuto & Wheeler (2006) model of Servant Leadership having five dimensions namely: altruistic, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping and organizational stewardship. After analyzing the scores of Executive Servant Leadership Scale and the interview transcripts of past and present subordinates; out of these 48 senior executives, 11 executives were found to be servant leaders. Out of these 11 executives, 3 were found to be inconsistent because of high standard deviation of the scores obtained from the instrument. Further the difference between the scores obtained from the immediate subordinates and next reporting were found to be significant. Therefore 8 senior executives were interviewed. Among these 8 executives 5 were male, 3 were female. Demographics of the research participants are described in Table 1 displayed below:

**Table 1: Showing the demographic details of Participants**

Respondents	Gender	Age Group	Industry
Participant 1	Male	45-50 Years	Chemical
Participant 2	Female	45-50 Years	Education
Participant 3	Male	50-55Years	IT
Participant 4	Male	50-55 Years	IT
Participant 5	Female	Above 55Years	Education
Participant 6	Male	45-50 Years	Manufacturing
Participant 7	Female	Above 55 Years	Corporate
Participant 8	Male	50-55 Years	IT

The interviews were conducted to permit the free flow of the description of the lived experiences of the respondents so that their thought process, goals, values, methods, feelings, perceptions and judgments could be captured; Open ended, non-suggestive questions were asked. The questions were targeted at eliciting their usual response to organizational situations. During the course of interview/conversation specific issues were raised, such as how they managed not to appear weak administrator while practicing forgiveness. The focus of each interview was to know and elicit how they thought, perceived acted and behaved in different situations thrown up by organizational dynamics. The presence of deception and the form it takes would naturally become obvious. All interviews took about 45–55 minutes, which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Before starting the interview process, following things were kept in mind:

- The researchers made an effort to have an informal interaction with the participants so as to build a rapport with them.
- The purpose of the study was explained to the participants in detail.
- The participants were assured of the confidentiality.

## 5 Data Analysis

The recorded transcripts were analyzed according to the set procedures with respect to IPA. To analyze the transcripts, the following procedure was undertaken as described by (Smith., Flowers & Larkin 2009).

- i. Reading and re-reading the Transcripts: At first, the transcripts were read and re-read by the researchers while listening to the audio recordings. At this point the researchers actively engaged themselves in the data. This step helped the researchers enter the participants' world. Repeated reading of the transcripts also helped the researchers understand how narratives can bind certain sections of the interview and also figure out the flow of the transcripts.
- ii. Initial Noting: At this stage, the researchers examined the semantic content at an exploratory level and noted everything of interest in the transcript. The researchers added the exploratory notes and comments on the subsequent readings of the transcripts. It is important to add comments that have a clear phenomenological focus that helps the researchers stay close to the explicit meaning of the participants' experiences. This step helped the researchers to explore events, relationships, and processes that were important to the participants and understand how and why the participants had those concerns.
- iii. Developing emergent Themes: At this stage, the researchers analyzed with the notes and comments that were added to the data set in the previous stages. The researchers produce a concise form of the note and comments that were added to the interview data set. The emergent themes were then ordered chronologically, that is in the order they came up in the data set.
- iv. Searching for connections across the themes: At this stage, the researchers tried to find a pattern between the emergent themes that were drawn from data set. The themes that represented parallel or similar meanings were placed together.

The above procedure was repeated for all the transcripts and then figured out the pattern across all the transcripts.

By analyzing the collected data, following super-ordinate themes were extracted:

**Theme1: Power Dynamics** One of the dominant themes that have emerged from the analysis of interview data is power dynamics. The respondents expressed that leaders have to create façade to maintain power position and influence; at the same time, they also have interests of subordinates in mind. The analysis of interview data shows that leaders have to deal with issues such as their criticism/ back-biting, cribbing, budget allocation; due to which strategic usage deception becomes inevitable.

**Respondent 1** stated, "Sometimes I have to deal with situations wherein my subordinates back-bite and intrigue against me before my seniors; this is likely to compromise my position and authority. Therefore, I have to be careful in dealing with subordinates. In order to deal with such situations, I have to give them pretentious threats of retaliation and have to clarify my position before seniors while throwing a word or two against such subordinates, though I don't intend to harm them."

**Respondent 6** expressed, "In a situation of budget allocation to various departments, sometimes I have to present information in a glossy and sometimes exaggerated way, which does not give the complete picture to the budget allocation team. This strategy is useful in getting more budget for my department. Though I don't intend to circumscribe or limit the resources to others, such a strategy is necessary and conducive to helping my own department to grow. Although my core nature is to be truthful, at times I feel that telling the truth might hinder the growth of my team members. Therefore, sometimes I have to resort to ways that may not tell the complete truth, especially when it comes to the growth and welfare of my team members. However, such situations make me feel perplexed as I have to make a choice between being truthful or working for the growth of my team members. But mostly, I choose an option that is beneficial for my subordinates."

**Respondent 3** remarked, "Sometimes my subordinates try to pursue their own personal agendas and goals. It is necessary to deal with such situations especially when their personal agendas and goals hamper the organizational interest. In such

situations, portraying to be strict with my subordinate can be useful, although my core nature is not that. Sometimes I have to portray myself to be strict in order to make sure that I am not perceived to be someone with a weaker authority”

Another issue that leaders deal with is cribbing by employees. For example, Respondent 2 shared her experiences. She stated, “At times employees continuously crib about various issues in the organization; such behaviors not only deteriorate their performance and motivation level but also damage the work environment. To deal with cribbing behaviors, I mostly try to resolve the issues. However, since every issue cannot be resolved, therefore I pretend to be solving them and pose as if the issue is beyond everyone’s control. The idea is to throw some water on the burning ambers.”

**Theme 2: Mistakes/Error Management** Another dominant theme that has emerged in the present study is mistake/error management. The respondents have stated that unintentional deviations from organizational expectations can occur at various levels and are pervasive in nature. These mistakes can occur either due to organizational factors such as organizational practices and policies or due to individual factors such as individual fallibility, faulty communication, mistakes due to not following rules, errors due to choosing wrong alternative. Leaders have shared their experiences of using deception in diverse ways to manage these mistakes. For example, Respondent 5 said, “I can recall an incident when one of my subordinates needed maternity leave; however, such provision is not there in the organization. Since I couldn’t see her suffering, I asked her to take leave while she was present only on papers and someone else performed her duties. Although bypassing rules makes me feel uncomfortable. However, sometimes taking such actions becomes necessary to fulfill the interests of my subordinates, even if it is perceived as unethical.”

**Respondent 7** narrated, “I can recall an event when there was a slight miscommunication between me and my seniors due to which my subordinates couldn’t achieve what was expected from them. While I did not hold them accountable for the failure, I did point out that we could have done better and shared a part of the responsibility of failure, but only a part of the responsibility though I think I should have taken full responsibility. I don’t know if it compromises my authenticity, but I feel such strategies not only protect my image in the eyes of my subordinates but also enhance the trust level.”

It is to be noted that the leader’s consciousness is manifesting with a sense of fear of losing face, but in any case, his mindset is oriented towards maintaining trust of the team.

**Theme 3: Workplace Transgressions/ Offences** Workplace transgressions/offences is another dominant super-ordinate theme that was extracted from data analysis. Respondents have stated that offensive behavior at workplace is quite usual and leaders need to take responsible to tackle such behaviors. Offensive behaviors occur in form of harassment, bullying, aggression, destructive behavior, unfair treatment and prejudice. Leaders have shared their experiences of using different forms of deception to manage offensive behaviors of employees. Respondent 1 shared his experiences. “I can share an episode with you. One of my subordinates was socially excluded by other subordinates. This incident created a negative environment within my team and degraded their performance as well. The entire incident was quite painful for me as I could not see my subordinate suffering. In order to reduce my subordinate’s suffering, I pretended to completely ignore the employees who were involved in the incident. I even refused to acknowledge their hellos, though I would assign them work but through somebody else. I did all this to create an impression that something was wrong with their behavior. As a result, the employees themselves came to me and asked the reason of my ignorance; and I made them clear that such unfair treatment would not be tolerated.” Respondent 8 mentioned, “Once I noticed that one of my subordinates was being bullied by some other employees. I could feel the stress that my subordinate was going through. To make him feel better, I threatened them with punishment. Sometimes it is good to fake myself; especially when it comes to the welfare of my subordinates”. Sharing a similar experience Respondent 4 expressed, “I came across aggressive behavior of one of my subordinates wherein he was using abusive language, making others uncomfortable. It was difficult for me to see my own subordinates working in a toxic environment. To manage the situation, I prepared a memo in writing to seek an explanation and made it communicated to him through someone else, and then I discussed the matter with him.”

**Theme 4: Conflict Management** Conflict management is another dominant theme that has emerged from the analysis of interview data. This conflict can arise due to scarce resources, difference in opinion, organizational structure and hostile work environment. Respondents have shared their experiences of using deceptive techniques to resolve conflicts.

Respondent 1 remarked, “There are circumstances when a difference of opinion between me and my work associates affects the work of my subordinates. In such situations, sometimes I have to pretend to my subordinates that the conflict has been resolved, but in reality, it still exists. In my experience, this strategy is useful at times as acting to resolve the conflict creates a positive synergy amongst my subordinates.” Respondent 5 said, “I have experienced circumstances wherein giving clear statements might worsen the situation of conflict and can also hinder the growth of my subordinates. To overcome such a state of affairs sometimes I use statements that might sound ambiguous or might have multiple meanings. This approach really works in complex situations. In most cases, my conflict resolution tactics are more cooperative, but when it comes to the growth of my team members, I have to apply a different approach.” Respondent 6 shared his experience, “I remember one event when we had a conflict with one of our suppliers. There was a fear that supplier might retaliate and might also stop their business operations with us. To overcome the situation, I and my colleagues behaved as if the conflict has been resolved and we can pursue our future business operations.”

## 6 Composite Description

The participants shared their experiences of using deception in numerous forms. The leaders mentioned that they employ deception as a strategy to deal with various organizational issues. The participants expressed that they have their subordinates' interests in their minds and want them to grow. However, they face certain complex work situations such as conflict management, mistake management, workplace transgressions, and power dynamics. The participants experienced that the employment of deception in a way that does not harm their subordinates is a useful approach to handle organizational issues and challenges; especially when such issues cannot be resolved in a straight forward way. Leaders have mentioned that while employing deception, they also take care of their subordinates' interests, needs, well-being, and growth.

Participants in general employ deception in various forms, such as creating façade acting to be strict, giving pretentious threats to subordinates, exaggerations, and using ambiguous messages.

## 7 Discussion

The present study was undertaken to examine the use of deception by servant leaders. For this purpose, using IPA we analyzed the lived experiences of participants/leaders from various sectors. The participants in the study expressed their concerns about their subordinates' interests, needs, well-being, and growth. At the same time, they wanted to be truthful, honest, and ethical. However, they encountered several complex work situations involving differences and conflicts, workplace transgressions, politics involving power games, and mistakes of diverse styles. The subjects expressed that sometimes these workplace challenges could not be handled in a truthful and honest ways. While the essential characteristic of their consciousness continued to remain rooted in truthfulness, compassion and concern for the subordinates; they did not lose sight of maintaining organizational discipline and task performance. Since the participants felt that certain complex work situations could not be dealt with the virtue of truthfulness, they used deception in diverse ways, such as exaggerations, portraying themselves as strict, using ambiguous language that does not show the complete picture, façade manipulations, creating facades, and concealing facts. It was observed that the participants used deception in a way that enhanced the growth of their subordinates as well as the organization. Studies show that whenever employees find themselves at odds with the organizational values, they might try to create a façade so as to gain acceptance within the organization. Creating a façade is an act of self-presentation wherein the employee might suppress his or her perceptions and values and pretend to express those perceptions and attitudes that they do not hold. This phenomenon of suppressing one's perceptions and pretending to accept the organizational values is termed as "creating façades of conformity" (Hewlin, 2009). The analysis of the lived experiences of the participants of the present study states that they experienced certain situations at work where they felt the necessity of creating a façade. It was observed that the participants made a strategic use of deception so as to deal with diverse situations at workplace. Servant Leadership style is imbued with spiritual orientation (Sendjaya & Cooper 2011; Khan, Khan, & Chaudhry, 2015; Williams, Brandon, Hayek, Haden, & Atinc 2017) focusing on elements of forgiveness, compassion and truthfulness (Van Dierendonck, & Patterson 2015; Gunn, 2002; Ahmad, Islam, D'Cruz, Noronha, 2021; Patterson 2003). It also focuses on healing the emotions of followers, their aspirations and empowering them to grow (Wheeler, 2011). However, according to the present study, the participants were characterized by all these virtues used deception in diverse form. Therefore, the present study can help us understand and explore a different perspective of servant leadership style. According to this perspective, servant leadership style is an attitude in general that acts according to the situation. The current study demonstrates that servant leadership style, with all its virtues, functions in accordance with the situation even when those situations require it to act against its virtues. The analysis of the lived experiences of the participants shows that the characteristics of their consciousness were rooted to the attributed such as compassion, empathy, truthfulness, and healing the emotions of the subordinates. However, when the situations were such that it could not be dealt with truthfulness; they employed deception. The present study also shows that the servant leadership style is not an idealistic attitude, but a leadership style that has a degree of pragmatism. Since the present study shows that servant leaders employ deception so as to protect their image and position, it can be interpreted that servant leadership style is not only oriented towards others but also self-oriented. It does not always compromise personal interests to fulfill the interests of others, but acts pragmatically according to the situation.

## 8 Implication

The present study is an attempt to explore the experiences of senior executives from different sectors. This study highlights the significance of deception in dealing with numerous challenges in the workplace. The participants in the study put their subordinates first and were characterized by truthfulness, trust, empathy, and emotional healing. Leaders shared their insights on the necessity of the usage of deception at workplace. Since there is no research done to explore how servant leaders use deception, this study is an initial attempt to explore how servant leaders who are empathetic and truthful employ deception. The present study could help the researchers to understand servant leadership style with a new perspective. According to this perspective, servant leadership style is an attitude in general that acts according to the situation. This study shows that servant leadership style is not an idealistic attitude but a pragmatic leadership style that not always compromise personal interests to fulfill the interests of others, but acts pragmatically according to the situation. Apart from focusing on healing the emotions of the subordinates; servant leadership style is pragmatic in nature that acts differently in different situations. Therefore, this study can be a basis for future research on the strategic usage of deception

in the workplace. It can help researchers to explore how servant leaders are pressured by workplace conditions that demand them to employ deception. Since the attributes of the servant leadership style are contrary to those of deception, this research can be a guide to analyze how servant leaders resolve the dilemma faced by them while employing deception. This study can also guide people in managerial positions to use deception in a way that does not harm the employees' as well as organizational interests.

## 9 Limitations

Since the present study is an initial attempt to understand how servant leaders might be pressured by various workplace processes because of which they may use deception in a strategic way; the findings of the present study cannot be generalized, further empirical works are required so as to generalize the findings of the present research. The present study has acquired qualitative method, which possess the limitation of being subjective in nature; therefore, further studies need to be conducted with quantitative or mixed method so as to understand whether or not leaders with virtuous behavioral characteristics makes the usage of deception at workplace.

## 10 Conclusion

The present study used IPA to investigate the lived experiences of senior executives from different industries. The characteristics of the participant's consciousness were rooted to truthfulness, empathy, trust, compassion, taking care of subordinates' well-being and healing the emotions of the subordinates. Based on the analysis of the lived experiences of the participants, it can be concluded that leaders face certain complex situations at work, due to which the strategic use of deception becomes inevitable, even though the nature of deception is contrary to that of servant leadership style. The participants employed deception in diverse ways, such as exaggerations, creating facades, using ambiguous language. Since leaders were concerned about the growth and welfare of their subordinates, they used deception in way that enhanced the well-being of their subordinates and strengthened the trust level. This research helps us to explore a new perspective of servant leadership style. This perspective connects the servant leadership style from situational leadership that acts differently in different situation. This study concludes that servant leadership style is not an idealistic attitude but a pragmatic leadership style that not always compromise personal interests to fulfill the interests of others, but acts pragmatically according to the situation. Therefore, it can be concluded that workplace conditions may pressure a leader to engage in deception. However, the way in which deception is applied depends on the leadership style.

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