

# Servant Leadership, Followers Job Satisfaction, Empowerment and Performance: The Moderating Effect of Gender

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## Abstract

Leadership is the skill and art of inspiring an organization's followers to carry out their duties with passion to achieve the organization's objectives and cultivate group development. Referring to the golden age and context of globalization, technological boost, and socioeconomic prosperity, contemporary organizations have experienced drastic changes over the past decades. These revisions have presented management with unexpected challenges that have forced them to pursue new routes in organizational leadership and management. Nowadays, leadership theorists have put more attention and emphasis on humility and servility in the leadership context. Servant leadership is a blossoming new research field and leadership paradigm that has been linked to ethics, humility, and morals. Servant leaders care about the satisfaction level of their followers more than their own desires. In this conceptual research, we will begin by summarizing and reviewing the literature on the origin of servant leadership. The literature on job satisfaction, empowerment, and performance will then be reviewed, and their relationship to servant leadership will be examined, with a focus on the moderating effect of leaders' gender on these features.

## Keywords

Servant Leadership, Empowerment, Job Satisfaction, Performance, Gender

## 1. Introduction

Leadership is the ability and art of persuading organizational followers to do their jobs with passion and enthusiasm to reach organizational goals and common growth (Barrow, 1977). Leadership is one of the most important and deeply

studied social impacts in organizational behavior science. This is because the progression and prosperity of all political, organizational, and economic systems rely on the effectiveness and efficiency of leaders (Barrow, 1977). Drucker (1959) predicted that one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century that management will face, is to find the best and most effective way to lead, influence, encourage, and challenge knowledge workers and followers. In past decades, leadership study has changed significantly from a focus on transformational leadership toward a more empowering, shared, relational, and global approach in which the collaboration between leaders and followers is a critical feature (Avolio et al., 2009).

Within the context of globalization, technological advancements, and socioeconomic prosperity, contemporary organizations have experienced major alterations in recent decades (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). These changes have presented HR management with new and vital challenges. Most of the practices which were carried out by HR specialists are being entrusted to line managers and supervisors (Hall & Torrington, 1998; Schuler & Jackson, 1987). Therefore, organizations are faced with intrinsic and systematic problems like power abuse (Sankowsky, 1995), toxic emotions (Frost, 2003), unethical practices (Currall & Epstein, 2003), bullying leadership (Einarsen, 1999), and the violation of employees' mental and job satisfaction and work-life balance (Thornthwaite, 2004; Wright & Cropanzano, 2004).

In the past decennary, leadership theorists put more attention on the emphasis of humility and servility in the leadership context. Leaders who care about the happiness and satisfaction of their followers more than their own desires are humble and servant, and their humility helps to grow their relationships with followers and trigger followers to put their effort and invest in their jobs (Owens & Hekman, 2012). Theories in Leadership try to explain, transparent, and organize the complexity and intricacy of the nature and effects of leadership (Bass & Bass, 2009). Servant leadership is a new emerging scientific subject and also a leadership paradigm and style that has been associated with ethics, humility, and morals (Lanctot & Irving 2010; Graham, 1991; Russell, 2001; Whetstone, 2002).

Although numerous and extensive studies have been conducted in the field of leadership which validate mainstream forms of recognized leadership, there have been relatively insignificant and less comparative research and studies on servant leadership and its effects (Gandolfi et al., 2017).

The main idea and assumption underlying servant leadership are that leaders who are most effective at motivating and stimulate followers are those who prioritize the fulfillment and desires of followers before their own (Greenleaf, 2008). The main purpose and objective of a servant leader is not to treat followers to encourage them to reciprocate with higher performance; rather, by improving follower's satisfaction, a servant leader helps them to be more enthusiastic and more willing to serve others (ex. Stakeholders, teammates and the organization) (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

Job satisfaction is an employee's perceptual, noetic and emotional reaction to

feelings and sentiment of dislike or liking their job (Muchinsky, 1993) or as a psychological condition simultaneously indicated by affective and cognitive signs (Brief & Weiss, 2002; Hulin & Judge, 2003). But in this article, we will use Muchinsky's definition of emotional reaction.

During previous decades, employee empowerment has become more popular, approaching the level of a craze or movement, entirely based on someone's perception (Abrahamson, 1996; Conger & Kanungo, 1988). At its core, by distributing decision-making powers to the lowest level within an organization where effective decisions can be made, the philosophy of empowerment intends to enhance staff satisfaction with their jobs (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Research has indicated a positive correlation between servant leadership style and its effects on follower outcomes and results such as job satisfaction, empowerment, and performance (Liden et al., 2014b; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Our conceptual model depicts the association between servant leadership and these factors, as well as the gender's moderating effect, as illustrated in **Figure 1**.

This paper is structured as follows. We begin by summarizing and reviewing the literature on the origin of servant leadership. We will then conduct a literature review on job satisfaction and empowerment. In conclusion, we will discuss the moderating effect of gender on these reviews. Then we will raise and address the following questions. First, how does the servant leadership style affect organizational performance and job satisfaction by empowering the subordinates? Second, what is the moderating effect of a leader's gender on this process? We believe this contribution will be particularly valuable to women in leadership positions. Finally, we will provide recommendations for future studies and practices.

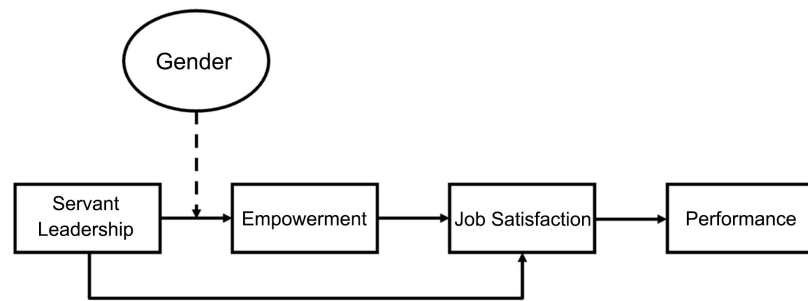
## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Theoretical Background and Origin of Servant Leadership**

A servant leader is a steward who supports the organization (Reinke, 2004). It emphasizes that servant leaders prioritize others more than themselves. They are motivated by a desire to serve rather than by an ambition for power (Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

In his three key works, Greenleaf introduces servant leadership to an organizational context: *The Servant as Leader* (1979), *The Institution as Servant* (1972a), and *Trustees as Servants* (1972b), all of which were authored after Greenleaf retired from AT&T after 40 years of managerial positions.

According to Greenleaf (1979), The Servant-Leader is servant first. The desire to lead is then brought about by conscious choice. Although Greenleaf has made substantial contributions to the modern study of servant leadership, however, servant leadership is not a fresh notion. It has its antecedents in ancient traditions of the world's greatest civilizations, as well as in the words of countless great leaders and philosophers (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).



**Figure 1.** Research conceptual framework.

Based on his observations of *Journey to the East* by Hesse, Greenleaf (1979) envisioned the servant as leader and used the character Leo to describe a truthful servant: His servant nature was the real man, not conferred, not assumed, and not to be taken away. Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership is symbolized by ten important and key characteristics: empathy, healing, listening, persuasion, awareness, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, and obligation to the development of individuals as well as the strengthening of communities (Gandolfi et al., 2017).

As the result of a leader as a servant, followers are encouraged to become self-motivated individuals who wish to serve others when strong interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers are developed, which contributes to the development of strong relationships between leaders and followers (Manz & Sims Jr., 1987). Prior literature has frequently made the use of social learning theory in terms of explaining the positive effects that servant leadership has on the outcomes for followers (Liden et al., 2014b), and according to social learning theory, individuals acquire new viewpoints and perspectives, ways of thinking, and behavioral patterns by watching and imitating the actions of influential models in their ecosystems, such as their group's leader (Bandura & Walters, 1977). The servant leader runs and leads an organization by granting followers the opportunity to grow within it (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Unlike other styles of leadership, which emphasizes the organization's success, a servant leader wants to help and serve their followers (Greenleaf, 1979; Lemoine et al., 2019). A servant leader is known to have a strong conviction as well as a robust characteristic. This is due to the fact that they not only adopt the commitments of a servant but also adopt the nature of one as well. This is demonstrated by their unwavering dedication to responding to the needs of others (Jaworski, 1997).

Managers and supervisors within the organization demonstrate servant leadership style by prioritizing the personal and professional development of employees over the organization's financial goals (Graham, 1991). Multiple researches have demonstrated that servant leadership traits predict positive employee and organizational outcomes across cultures and circumstances (Han et al., 2010; Liden et al., 2015). Despite the fact that servant as a leader was first presented as a framework for organizational leadership forty years ago, the concept of servant leadership is still in the very beginning stages of its theoretical

development (Liden et al., 2014b).

## 2.2. Empowerment

Neilsen (1986) interpreted empowerment as both providing subordinates with resources and maximizing their sense of self-worth, whereas Burke (1986) addressed the difference between the two definitions. However, similar to the majority of management researchers, he preferred to use empowerment in the manner of delegation instead of enabling.

According to the management literature, delegation and decentralization of decision-making authority are important components of empowerment (Burke, 1986; Kanter, 1983).

Empowerment as a Relational Construction Power is primarily a relational concept in management and social influence literature. It is used to define the perceived power or control that an individual or organizational subunit has over others (Crozier, 1964; Dahl, 1957).

Several studies in the literature address how empowerment can be seen as part of a relational or power-sharing perspective (Burke, 1986; Burpitt & Bigoness, 1997). The motivational impact of empowerment on subordinates was highlighted by Conger and Kanungo (1988), who argued that a notion of empowerment as “sharing power” is inadequate. Empowerment, at its core, is the practice of delegating decision-making authority to the lowest level of an organization at which competent decisions can be made in order to increase individual motivation in the workplace (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Empowering employees has been linked to significant improvements in work-related outcomes, and there is now empirical evidence to support this hypothesis (Liden et al., 2000; Sparrowe, 1994; Spreitzer et al., 1997).

## 2.3. Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is indeed a mentality, and mindsets have traditionally been shown to be easily modifiable (Albarracin & Shavitt, 2018; McGuire, 1985). Due to the fact that people spend a considerable amount of time at work, as a result, job satisfaction has a significant impact on their personal and life satisfaction (Campbell et al., 1976). Therefore, many aspects, including supervision, leadership style, repetitive tasks, and job stress, clearly contribute to the mental health of workers and their satisfaction with their jobs (Bastian et al., 2014).

In the field of organizational research, it is essential to understand why people behave well in their jobs and why they are satisfied with their careers. There are numerous ways in which job satisfaction can be defined.

In this paper we use the definitions of Locke (1976) and Warr et al. (1979) for job satisfaction. According to these studies, intrinsic (extrinsic) job satisfaction is defined as a positive emotional and mental reaction attributable to an employee's assessment of their job or appraisal of intrinsic (extrinsic) employment features or experiences with those qualities.

### 3. Interactions

#### 3.1. Servant Leadership and Empowerment

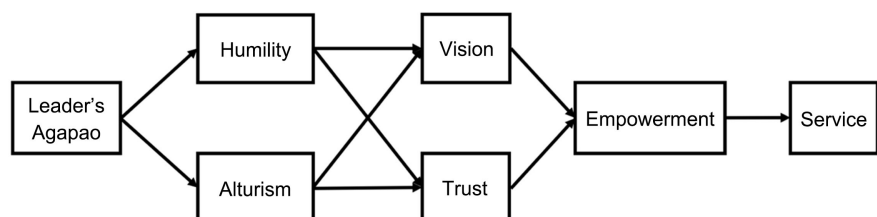
As a general definition, servant leadership involves a positive relationship between a leader and a subordinate. This type of relationship prioritizes the welfare and development of subordinates rather than acting self-interested or focusing exclusively on outcome, while sharing power as well (Liden et al., 2008; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Position is often the source of power for a person, and a servant leader distributes the power among others to take on leadership roles so that they can spread throughout the organization (Russell & Stone, 2002).

A relationship of trust must exist between the servant leader and the followers for empowerment. It entails entrusting others with responsibility and power with an insight into the eventual results of accountability (Liden et al., 2008). When these needs and interests are met, subordinates are more likely to view their leaders as supportive and encouraging. Therefore, they consequently remain strongly motivated and satisfied with their job. According to Van Dierendonck (2011), servant leadership is strongly and positively correlated with an employee's sense of empowerment. Asag-Gau and Van Dierendonck (2011) found support for their conceptual model where servant leadership had a direct impact on the meaning dimension of empowerment, and empowerment had a direct impact on employee's job satisfaction and organizational performance. Patterson (2003) designed a model to illustrate how leaders can exhibit Agapao (love) by demonstrating a sense of humility and altruism for the sake of the follower (Figure 2). Patterson states that these features can lead to vision and build trust, which ultimately results in the empowerment of followers and culminates in acts of service.

*Proposition 1:* A positive correlation exists between servant leadership and employee's empowerment.

#### 3.2. Servant Leader, Empowerment and Job Satisfaction

Historically, leadership has been considered as a significant factor in determining the level of satisfaction experienced by employees within an organization (Mount et al., 2006; Landeweerd & Boumans, 1994).



**Figure 2.** Patterson's original servant leadership model with empowerment. A Theoretical Model (p. 10), by K. Patterson (2003), Virginia Beach, VA: Regent University (UMI No. 3082719). Copyright 2003 by K. Patterson. Adapted with permission.

Scholars have argued for a long time that negative styles of leadership, such as destructive leadership, toxic leadership, and abusive leadership, are likely to be psychologically distressing to employees and also may potentially trigger employees to feel tired and exhausted and less satisfied within their job position (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). On the other hand, supportive leadership styles which are recognized as servant leadership, offer employees with adequate support and resources that enable them to deal with the demands of their jobs and the requirements of their tasks (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Marzuki (2013) pointed out that emotional encounters are an essential component of family and professional life; these perceptions can be the primary source of both positive and negative feelings. The rise of positive emotions (e.g. love, belief, pleasure, and promise) heals the body's functioning, while negative emotions may harm the satisfaction of individuals. Additionally, existing studies have shown that servant leadership has a significant impact on outcomes and job satisfaction. The study by Rivkin et al. (2014) demonstrated that servant leadership has a reverse effect on emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, Babakus et al. (2010) noticed that servant leadership enhances staff members' capacity and power to deal with the pressures and responsibilities of their jobs. When servant leaders are responsive to the demands and needs of their followers, they are better capable of giving their employees effective and genuine support; this support and empowerment, in turn, will contribute significantly to an increase in the level of job satisfaction experienced by subordinates.

Referring to Liden et al. (2008), servant leaders prioritize meeting and satisfying the needs of their followers. As a result, followers are more likely to feel supported and, therefore, are more satisfied with their jobs. There is also sufficient evidence in the literature to support existence of positive relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction (Schneider & George, 2011). Consequently, we consider emotional healing and perceived job demands to be outcomes of servant leadership, which supports the idea that servant leaders can improve the job satisfaction of their employees (Liden et al., 2008).

*Proposition 2a:* There is a positive relationship between servant leadership style and employees job satisfaction.

*Proposition 2b:* There is a positive relationship between empowered employee and job satisfaction.

### 3.3. Servant Leadership and Performance

Effective leadership is congruent with a follower's implicit perspective of leadership. This tends to increase legitimacy and the follower's ability to respond to the leader's influence (Liden et al., 2014b). Members of an organization are more likely to support and work even harder for leaders who put emphasis on relationships and ethics. This leadership style is essential to the development of strong societies as well as sustainable organizations (Cameron, 2008; Ehrhart & Klein, 2001; Luthans et al., 2007; Nohria & Khurana, 2010). It also improves or-



ganization citizenship behavior as well as teamwork efficiency (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). Correspondingly, servant leadership has emerged as a viable option for meeting the challenges faced by contemporary organizations.

It is common to use theories such as social exchange theory to explain how servant leadership can contribute positively to organizational performance, motivating its followers to take a more active role in caring for the organization, its stakeholders, and each other.

For example, employees are more likely to feel motivated to improve their performance when leaders assist and provide them with resources, guidance, and emotional support, thereby empowering them. Servant leaders are particularly inclined to this type of behavior (Greenleaf, 1979; Liden et al., 2014a). There is evidence linking servant leadership to improved employee job performance, and this benefit is substantial on both the team and the individual levels (Khan et al. 2022). Studies have also shown that servant leaders have a strong emphasis on development, provide feedback when it's needed, and enable skill development (Chen et al., 2015). This helps followers to improve their performance and do their jobs in better way by making it easier for them to meet their goals and take required actions (Chen et al., 2015). Patterson (2003) shows that servant leadership not only increases employees' overall performance on their job by empowering and increasing their job satisfaction, but it also enhances the service quality that employees provide to customers in organizations. For example, Chen et al. (2015) found that servant leaders who provide substantial support to employees during their working and learning processes improve the performance of the work place (hair salon) employees and their potential to provide excellent customer service. In this regard, servant leaders should be able to provide their staff with a safe and supportive environment that encourages them to take risks, propose creative and new and innovative ideas, and apply those ideas in their work environment (Liden et al., 2014b). Moreover, a servant leader promotes the employee satisfaction by providing assistance to individual and group members, reducing relationship conflicts, and fostering the wider community spirit among the followers, thereby increasing both individual and group performance in the organization (Schaubroeck et al., 2011).

*Proposition 3:* There is a positive relationship between servant leadership and employee performance.

#### 4. Moderating Effect of Leaders' Gender

Gender is typically the most prominent characteristic for categorizing individuals (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Discrimination and implicit leader stereotypes have put women at a disadvantage for decades in leadership positions (Hogue & Lord, 2007). As a result, teams led by women leaders may perceive incongruity and experience dissonance as a result of the perception that leadership is a masculine behavior (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Nevertheless, this does not imply that female leaders are less effective or even that they lead in any different way than male



leaders; rather, the point is that the exact same guidelines and standards may be inferred and processed differently by two individuals of different genders. According to Bekiari and Ntakou's (2018) statistical analysis, women leaders have performed better than men in some categories, such as salary, promotion, and organization, while falling short in others such as argumentativeness.

Servant leadership enables leaders to step outside of gender role standards and norms and provide followers the most effective leadership style for their needs, as well as build relationships, which are recognized as more feminine activities (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Johnson et al., 2008). Although gender differences have caused some plague about the feminine and masculine aspects of servant leadership (Reynolds, 2011), the results demonstrate inconclusiveness and inconsistency in male and female servant leadership behaviors (Diehl, 2015).

Barbuto and Gifford (2010) compared the approach of males and females by using five characteristics of servant leadership (altruistic calling, wisdom, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship). Regarding the agentic and communal characteristics of servant leadership, the results of the study indicated that there was no significant difference in the implicating the five dimensions of servant leadership among male and female leaders. However, when female leaders exhibit more communal characteristics which are prominent in the servant leadership approach, members of their teams evaluate them more favorably rather than male leaders (Kark et al., 2012). As suggested by Liden and his colleagues (2014b) leader's gender could act as a potential moderating factor for leadership and Eagly and Karau (2002) specifically mentioned that women would perhaps hold advantages for any less masculine forms of leadership such as servant leadership. Lemoine and Blum's (2021) work provides additional weight to this conclusion.

*Proposition 4:* Leaders' sex (gender) moderates the positive effects of servant leadership on follower performance, and this effect on follower's performance is stronger when the leaders are female.

## 5. Conclusion and Future Directions

Considering the emphasis placed on the relationships between servant leadership style and its outcomes on subordinates and followers, our results indicate that servant leadership style positively impacts employee work attitudes and performance (e.g., Chen et al., 2013; Liden et al., 2014a, 2014b). The results of our research demonstrate that servant leadership can affect both individual-level and group-level outcomes, suggesting that the servant leadership style is effective at all organizational levels. In addition, the findings highlight the crucial role of servant leaders in fostering a positive work environment and creating a high level of group and individual performance. As expected, we found that the gender of the servant leader did not affect his or her ability to drive prosocial motivation or performance. However, to the extent that organizations shift toward a more feminine and supportive base, female servant leaders can be more effective than

men at using the servant leadership style. As a result of this phenomenon, a growing awareness of the need to create more democratic and equal workplaces has emerged.

Female leaders or supervisors may find the most useful and practical implications from this research, as this research suggests that servant leadership is the ideal leadership style for women to apply in order to reduce and even reverse the typically negative effects of agentic masculine leadership stereotypes and associated cognitive dissonance. These findings suggest that contemporary organizations, particularly those in more female-dominated and communal industries, should consider training new managers and leaders in the practices of servant leadership. Finally, our research provides sufficient support for the positive outcomes of servant leadership, particularly among female servant leaders.

To gain a better understanding of servant leadership and its implications, it is necessary to identify the most important dimensions of servant leadership in predicting different types of outcomes. In addition, it is necessary to review and provide strong evidence that demonstrates the quantitative effect sizes of servant leadership on relevant outcomes. Further, more focused and systematic research is required on servant leadership and moderating effects of servant leaders' cultural demographics.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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