

# Is It Influence or Pressure? A Study on the Dual Path Impact of Self-Sacrificial Leadership on Employee Organizational Citizenship Behavior

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the two-sided effects of self-sacrificial leadership on employees' organizational citizenship behavior, and to provide inspiration for the theoretical and practical communities on how to harness the utility of self-sacrificial leadership. Based on the theory of self-determination and social information processing, With the help of the Leader-Employee Matching Questionnaire from 15 companies in China, the results of this paper show 1) self-sacrificial leadership positively affects employees organizational citizenship behavior and compulsory citizenship behavior; 2) harmonious work passion mediates the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and organizational citizenship behavior; 3) citizenship pressure mediates the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and compulsory citizenship behavior; 4) organizational justice positively moderate the relationship between the self-sacrificial leadership and the harmonious work passion, negatively moderate the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and citizenship pressure. The findings complement the double-edged sword effect and boundary conditions of self-sacrificial leadership affecting employees' organizational citizenship behavior, revealing that organizations and managers need to dialectically view the impact of self-sacrificial leadership and pay attention to employees' real psychological states.

## Keywords

Self-Sacrificial Leadership, Organizational Citizenship Behavior, Compulsory Citizenship Behavior, Harmonious Passion, Citizenship Pressure, Organizational Justice

## 1. Introduction

In its new round of development, China has emphasized the need to improve the modern enterprise system with Chinese characteristics, promote entrepreneurship, and accelerate the construction of world-class enterprises. The growth and breakthrough of enterprises in the era of digital economy require managers to possess the spirit of exploration and sacrifice, to promote the organization to become a vital force for high-quality development, and to renew the entrepreneurial spirit of the new era. In academia, this kind of leadership style, which involves sacrificing one's own interests and privileges for the sake of collective well-being, is called self-sacrificial leadership (Yeon & Renate, 1998). Self-sacrificial leadership is one of the leadership styles that highly reflects traditional Chinese culture and social values. As research has progressed, some scholars have expressed concern about whether the impact of self-sacrificial leadership is actually recognized by employees (Van-Knippenberg & Van-Knippenberg, 2005). Employees may not be aware of or appreciate the sacrifices of the leader, allowing the hero to end up "bleeding, sweating and crying".

Organizational citizenship behavior is the spontaneous performance of work by employees that is not explicitly expressed in their job duties, but is beneficial to organizational effectiveness as a whole. As research has progressed, there has been a gradual differentiation from organizational citizenship behavior to involuntary, stressful organizational citizenship behavior called compulsory citizenship behavior (Eran, 2007). People tend to speculate on sacrificial behavior that are counterintuitive, and uncertainty of attribution interspersed with absolute power order makes employees with stress and worry to produce compulsory citizenship behavior. However, there is still a lack of exploration of the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and employees' compulsory citizenship behavior and the mechanism of action. Based on self-determination theory (Abbreviation: SDT) and social information processing theory (Abbreviation: SIPT), this paper systematically describes the dual-path effects and boundary conditions of self-sacrificial leadership on employees' organizational citizenship behavior and their alienation.

The second part is based on a review of existing research findings, combined with SDT to discuss the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and employee organizational citizenship behavior, as well as compulsory citizenship behavior, and the mediating role played by harmonious work passion in positive path; using SDT and SIPT to discuss the mediating role played by citizenship pressure in negative path; based on the main logic of SIPT, it discusses the moderating role of organizational justice, and finally synthesizes the above analysis to put forward hypotheses H1~H6, and constructs the theoretical model of this paper. Secondly, the third part is the research design of this study, which determines the measurement scale and obtains a total of 71 leaders-354 employees' paired questionnaires in different enterprises of China. The fourth part is the data analysis part of this study, which mainly utilizes SPSS23.0 software for data

quality test and MPLUS8.3 software for hypothesis test of multi-level linear model. The fifth part then presents the conclusions and revelations of this paper, mentioning the future research directions.

## 2. Research Hypothesis

Self-sacrificial leadership are willing to give up or delay the satisfaction of their own interests, benefits and privileges in order to achieve organizational goals and collective well-being. Self-determination theory suggests that internalized norms of value for behavior enhance autonomous motivation, and that individuals may passively accept rules in order to gain goodwill and avoid offending superiors. On the autonomous motivation path, self-sacrificial leaders' taking the lead enhances employees' internalization of altruistic values, rather than seeing sacrifice as a roundabout strategy for their superiors' personal gain. Their internal motivation will be stimulated and they will exhibit more organizational citizenship behavior (Guo et al., 2021). On the controlled motivation path, employees are usually unable to reject the expectations and demands communicated by their superiors and have to increase their commitment to extra-role behavior to be in step with the corporate culture (Van-Knippenberg & Van-Knippenberg, 2005). In addition, leadership sacrifices are contrary to the perceived style of the leader's strong, unrelenting style, and employees are prone to compulsive citizenship behavior in a state of uncertainty. As a result, hypotheses H1: self-sacrificial leadership has a positive effect on employees' organizational citizenship behavior; H2: self-sacrificial leadership has a positive effect on employees' compulsive citizenship behavior.

Harmonious passion emphasizes the ability of individuals to independently identify with the values and norms of the work they do and internalize them as their core identity, which is reflected in the three aspects of emotion, cognition, and behavioral tendencies. Harmonious passion reflects employees' heartfelt recognition and admiration for self-sacrificial leadership, and condenses the process of subordinates' integration and internalization of their values (Guo et al., 2021). Emotionally, self-sacrificial leadership emphasize and strive for a common collective vision, and this extraordinary leadership will inspire employees' morale and hope, and employees will be willing to engage in organizational citizenship behavior. Cognitively, self-sacrificial leadership who actively work for the benefit of the organization and take the initiative to care for their subordinates raise the level of self-esteem of their employees and create a good atmosphere for teamwork. Further, it satisfies the individual's competence and relational needs, thus providing nourishment for employees to internalize their identity as a member of the collective and their sense of ownership. Behaviorally, self-sacrificial leadership invest time, energy, and other valuable resources to support their subordinates and help employees improve their commitment and sustainable behavior. Therefore, Hypothesis H3 is proposed: employees' harmonious passion for work mediates the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and organiza-

tional citizenship behavior.

Citizenship pressure is the extent to which employees perceive that there is pressure to perform organizational citizenship behavior (Mark et al., 2010). The concept of citizenship pressure stems from academic concerns about the dark side of organizational citizenship behavior, which is often triggered by organizations' implicit expectations and informal rewards for employees' out-of-role behavior. Self-determination theory emphasizes that the intention to obey external authority and norms will cause employees to exhibit more controlling motives. Self-sacrificial leadership who gives favors to employees create a "sense of debt" in return, reinforcing the idea that subordinates will give of themselves to the organization, and ultimately increasing the psychological pressure on them to engage in citizenship behavior. Specifically, self-sacrificial leadership formally or informally signal to employees that they are expected, admired, and rewarded for their proactive behavior and self-giving, which leads subordinates to believe that they must make sacrifices similar to those made by the leader in order to gain the leader's favor. In addition, the social norms reinforced by self-sacrificial leadership will further exacerbate employees' "should" or "must" pressures (Mark et al., 2010). Based on the above analysis, Hypothesis H4 is proposed: employee citizenship pressure mediates the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and compulsory citizenship behavior.

Organizational justice is the employee's perception of justice arising from the organizational environment, which mainly contains three aspects: distributional justice, procedural justice, and interactive justice. Social information processing theory suggests that individuals will rely more on their interpretation of the social environment as the surrounding social information becomes more ambiguous. When employees are anxious about performing proactive behavior, organizational justice initiatives provide them with complementary information to attribute leaders' sacrificial behavior (Yin et al., 2018). In an organizationally fair environment, employees will feel that the organization recognizes and values their own contributions, thus reducing concerns about the rationality and legitimacy of the organizational system. In addition, the humility and sincerity of the leader makes it easier for employees to accept and identify with the authority, rather than seeing the leader's sacrifices as hypocritical behavior that extracts value from the employee and seeks personal gain. With such a sense of psychological security, employees tend to be autonomous and passionate about their work. Therefore, Hypothesis H5 is proposed: organizational justice moderates the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and employees' harmonious passion on the one hand, and the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and employees' citizenship pressure on the other hand. Specifically, the higher the degree of organizational justice, the stronger the positive relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and harmonious passion, and the weaker the positive relationship with citizenship pressure.

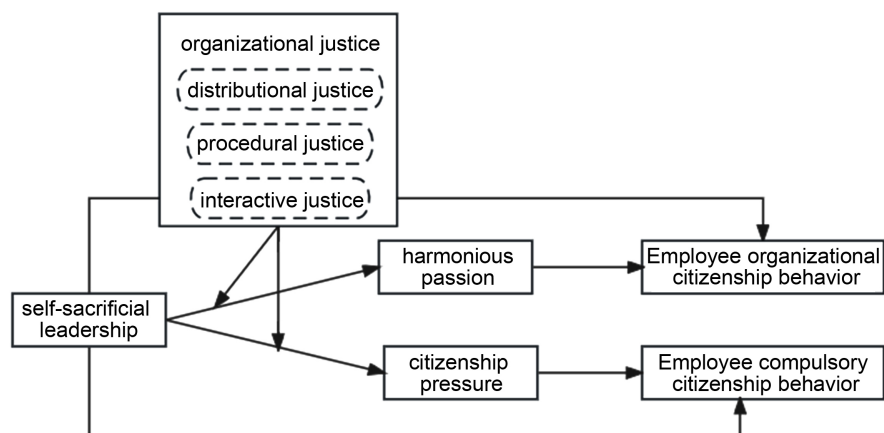
Based on the above, this study further proposes a moderated mediating effect.

In high organizational justice contexts, employees are more likely to empathize with and trust their leaders' sacrificial behavior, and further develop a harmonious type of passion for their work. As a result, they are more willing to actively engage in organizational citizenship behavior; on the contrary, in the context of low organizational justice, employees are more likely to catalyze suspicion and pressure on current affairs and passively engage in organizational citizenship behavior. As a result, Hypothesis H6: organizational justice positively moderates the mediating role of employees' harmonious passion between self-sacrificial leadership and organizational citizenship behavior, and negatively moderates the mediating role of employees' citizenship pressure between self-sacrificial leadership and compulsory citizenship behavior.

Based on the above four-part analysis, this paper constructs a two-path influence model diagram of self-sacrificial leadership and takes organizational fairness as a boundary condition for the influence of self-sacrificial leadership power change, as shown in **Figure 1**.

### 3. Research Design

**Research Sample and Data Collection.** This study used a questionnaire survey with leader-employee matching to obtain data. The research subjects were mainly from 15 enterprises of different natures in Hangzhou, Guangzhou and Chengdu, China. We randomly selected four to seven persons from the departmental personnel list of the enterprises and distributed employee questionnaires. For employees, they will be asked to fill in basic personal information and complete the self-sacrificial leadership, harmonious passion, citizenship pressure, and compulsory citizenship behavior scales. The leadership questionnaire will mainly be used by the head of the department to evaluate the organizational citizenship behavior of the employees, while the leaders will be required to fill in the basic information of the team. After eliminating the invalid questionnaires, 354 valid questionnaires of employees from 71 teams were finally screened and summarized, and the effective recovery rate was 89%. Among the 354 employees,



**Figure 1.** Self-sacrificial leadership dual path influence model constructed in this paper.

52.6% were male employees and 47.4% were female employees; in terms of age, 0.69% were under the age of 25, 28.1% were between the ages of 25% and 30%, 46% were between the ages of 30% and 35%, and 25.21% were over the age of 35; as for education, 38.4% were under the Bachelor's degree, 48.3% were under the Bachelor's degree, and 13.3% were postgraduate students and above.

**Variable Measurement.** The study scales were selected from well-established scales that have been utilized in empirical research many times, and were scored in this study using a five-point Likert scale (1 = very non-conforming, 5 = very conforming). Harmonious passion was scored using the 7-item harmonious passion subscale developed by [Vallerand et al. \(2003\)](#), which includes entries such as "This activity gives me a variety of experiences". Citizenship pressure was measured using the 8-item scale developed by [Mark and Anthony \(2015\)](#), with entries such as "I feel a lot of pressure to do a lot of work that is not strictly mine". Organizational citizenship behavior was measured using variables developed by [Farh et al. \(2007\)](#), including 9 entries, such as "Responsible and works hard even when there are no additional rewards". Compulsory citizenship behavior was measured using a 5-item scale developed by [Eran \(2007\)](#), which included items such as "I am pressured by my supervisor to put in extra effort to meet his/her work requirements".

In terms of setting control variables, this article uses four demographic variables, including gender, age, education level, and years of work, as control variables at the individual level. In addition, people's power distance affects the degree to which employees accept reciprocity norms in binary relationships ([Farh et al., 2007](#)), so this article also controls employee power distance at the individual level. This paper selects enterprise nature, team size, and organizational crisis status as control variables at the team level.

In terms of team conceptualization, self-sacrificial leadership adopted the 5-item measurement scale developed by [David & Daan \(2004\)](#), such as "My leader is willing to sacrifice his or her own interests to protect the interests of the employees when necessary" and other items. Organizational justice was measured by a four-dimensional scale developed by [Liu et al. \(2003\)](#), with dimensions including: distributive justice, procedural justice, leadership justice, and informational justice, with a total of 22 items. The Rwg values of the two scales were 0.79 and 0.9, the ICC(1) values were 0.11 and 0.08, and the ICC(2) values were 0.37 and 0.29, respectively. The above data indicate that the data results have sufficient intra-group consistency and inter-group heterogeneity to be aggregated to the team level. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all the scales selected for this study were distributed between 0.7 and 0.9, which meets the standard reliability requirements. In terms of the setting of control variables, this study takes five items as control variables at the individual level: gender, age, education, work experience, and power distance, and selects the nature of the enterprise, and the organizational crisis as control variables at the team level.

## 4. Analysis of Results

**Pre-Research Analysis.** A total of 204 valid questionnaires were obtained from this pre-survey through online completion, with a balanced distribution of demographic characteristics of the sample. Using SPSS 23.0 software to analyze the reliability and validity of the pre-test results. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and CITC value (Corrected Item-Total Correlation) were mainly selected as indicators of data reliability. The results showed that the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for all six scales met the requirements for excellent reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.8$ ). In addition, the CITC values of each scale item are all greater than 0.5, indicating that there is no need to adjust or delete the item. For validity tests, it was observed whether the KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) value of each scale was greater than 0.7, while the Barlett's sphere test was greater than 0.01. The results showed that all six scales met the above requirements, indicating suitability for factor analysis. Furthermore, when the exploratory factor analysis results of each scale meet the standard, that is, the cumulative variance explanatory power of factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 is greater than 60%, and the factor structure in factor rotation is consistent with the original scale, the item loadings in the factors are all greater than 0.5, it indicates good item validity.

**Homoscedasticity Bias Test.** This study involves five variables obtained from team members' self-reports, so there may be a problem of homoscedastic error. The Harman one-way test using SPSS 23.0 was used to verify the common method bias. The results showed that the maximum factor variance explained was 20.658%, which did not exceed the critical value of 40%; therefore, there was no serious common method bias in this study.

**Validation Factor Analysis.** Validation factor analysis was performed in this study using AMOS 23.0 software. The results showed that the fitting results of the six-factor model in this study ( $\chi^2/df = 1.45$ , RMSEA = 0.03, IFI = 0.939, TLI = 0.935, CFI = 0.938) met the test criteria and were better than the other models. Therefore, the discriminant validity of the six variables was good.

**Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis.** Correlation analysis between variables was conducted using SPSS23.0 software. The results showed that harmonious passion was significantly and positively correlated with organizational citizenship behavior ( $r = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and citizenship pressure was significantly and positively correlated with compulsory citizenship behavior ( $r = 0.3$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which laid a preliminary or subsequent hypothesis testing. The details are shown in **Table 1**.

**Main and Mediation Effect Tests.** Statistical analysis was performed using MPLUS 8.3 software. M1 and M3 showed that self-sacrificial leadership had a significant positive effect on employees' organizational citizenship behavior ( $\beta = 0.368$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and on employees' compulsory citizenship behavior (M7,  $\beta = 0.504$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and H1 and H2 were verified. Self-sacrificial leadership had a significant positive effect on harmonious passion and citizenship pressure, respectively (M5,  $\beta = 0.316$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; M6,  $\beta = 0.586$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Harmonious passion



**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis ( $N = 354$ ).

variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>Layer 1 variables</b>											
1) gender	1.47	0.50									
2) age	2.78	0.84	0.01								
3) education	2.72	0.73	-0.07	-0.02							
4) working experience	2.93	1.12	-0.02	0.29**	0.04						
5) power distance	3.76	0.83	-0.05	-0.09	0.07	0.02					
6) harmonious passion	3.87	0.68	-0.04	-0.08	-0.02	-0.04	0.19**				
7) citizenship pressure	3.74	0.85	-0.02	-0.09	0.11*	-0.07	0.33**	0.14**			
8) organizational citizenship behavior	3.64	0.93	-0.04	-0.03	0.01	-0.04	0.13*	0.06**	0.19**		
9) compulsory citizenship behavior	3.79	0.75	-0.06	-0.08	0.09	0.02	0.22**	0.3**	0.3**	0.03	
<b>Layer 2 variables</b>											
1) nature of enterprise	2.66	1.15									
2) organizational crisis	3.40	1.08	0.10								
3) self-sacrificial leadership	3.82	0.74	-0.1*	-0.05							
4) organizational justice	3.85	0.68	-0.02	-0.07	0.21**						

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed test).

had a significant positive effect on employees' organizational citizenship behavior (M2,  $\beta = 0.142$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and citizenship pressure also had a significant positive effect on employees' compulsory citizenship behavior (M4,  $\beta = 0.254$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Further, the Monte Carlo sampling results showed that the mediating effect of harmonious passion was significant ( $\beta = 0.045$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , confidence interval does not contain 0), and the mediating effect of citizenship pressure was significant ( $\beta = 0.149$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , confidence interval does not contain 0), which was verified for H3 and H4. The details are shown in **Table 2**.

**Moderating Effect Test.** The product term of organizational justice and self-sacrificial leadership was a significant positive predictor of harmonious passion (M9,  $\beta = 0.468$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and a significant negative predictor of citizenship pressure (M10,  $\beta = -0.161$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and Hypothesis 5 was tested.

**Moderated mediation effect test.** 20,000 Monte Carlo simulations showed that when organizational justice is high, there was a significant indirect effect of self-sacrificial leadership on employees' organizational citizenship behavior through harmonious passions (95% CI = [0.024, 0.149], not including 0), and there was a non-significant indirect effect of self-sacrificial leadership on employees' compulsory citizenship behavior through citizenship pressure (95% CI = [-0.115, 0.081], contains 0). Conversely, when organizational justice is low, the former effect is



**Table 2.** Main effects of self-sacrificial leadership, mediating effects of harmonious passion and citizenship pressure.

models	organizational citizenship behavior		compulsory citizenship behavior		harmonious passion	citizenship pressure
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
<b>Layer 1 variables</b>						
1) gender	0.005		-0.048		-0.009	0.003
2) age	-0.058		-0.028		-0.071	0
3) education	-0.015		0.014		-0.039	0.101
4) working experience	0.015		0.019		-0.002	-0.052
5) power distance	0.062*		0.157*		0.124	0.203***
(Mediating variables)						
6) harmonious passion		0.142***				
7) citizenship pressure				0.254***		
<b>Layer 2 variables</b>						
1) nature of enterprise	0.061		-0.003		-0.039	0.022
2) organizational crisis	-0.065		0.221		0.039	-0.027
3) self-sacrificial leadership	0.368**		0.504***		0.316**	0.586*

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed test).

insignificant (95% CI = [-0.031, 0.036], contains 0), and the latter is significant (95% CI = [0.043, 0.438], does not contain 0), as validated by H6.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

**Research Findings.** Self-sacrificial leadership significantly and positively influences employees' organizational citizenship behavior and compulsory citizenship behavior, in which employees' harmonious passion and citizenship pressure play mediating roles, respectively. In addition, organizational justice positively moderated the mediating role of harmonious passion and negatively moderated the mediating role of citizenship pressure.

**The Implications for Theory and Practice.** First, the dual-path effect of self-sacrificial leadership suggests that organizations should not simply assume that "sacrifice" is good, but should be good at building a shared vision and a cooperative atmosphere. Managers need to reduce the frequency of moralizing and avoid inducing employees to sacrifice by displaying the tragedy of self-sacrifice, and give them more room to maneuver. Second, positive leadership behavior may also trigger compulsory citizenship behavior among subordinates. Therefore, organizations should guard against promoting organizational citizenship behavior and shift to focusing on the psychological state of employees and providing them with an autonomous and supportive work environment. Finally, organizational justice serves as a "signal source" for self-sacrificial leader-

ship. Enterprises should establish a democratic, transparent, and consistent system of rewards, punishments, and promotions, and leaders should do what they say in the course of management, and follow through on the enterprise's systems and commitments.

**Research Limitations.** First, although Study 2 obtained data from multiple sources, more rigorous causal inferences can be obtained in the future by combining multi-temporal data, as most of the variables in this study continued to be self-assessed by employees. Second, this study did not consider the moderating role of individual factors on the efficacy of self-sacrificial leadership influence. In the future, we can try to incorporate personal traits such as employee conventionality and risk aversion to enrich the boundary conditions of self-sacrificial leadership influence. Finally, the joint effect of organizational justice and self-sacrificial leadership in this study confirms the “team-oriented” nature of self-sacrificial leadership as suggested by Van-Knippenberg B. and Van-Knippenberg D. (2005). Future research could introduce more organizational-level elements (e.g., organizational climate, norms of team reciprocity, human resource management practices, etc.) to broadly examine their complementary or substitutive roles with self-sacrificial leadership.

### Conflicts of Interest

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

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