

Serving the Servants

Positive Employee Outcomes of Servant Leadership

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Abstract

We examined the relationships between servant leadership and employee job satisfaction and role overload, and the moderating role of employee motives. Using time-lagged data from 386 employees, we found that servant leadership was positively related to employee job satisfaction and negatively related to role overload. The relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction was stronger among employees with high prosocial values and low impression management motives, and surprisingly, weaker among employees with high organizational concern (a selfless orientation). The negative relationship between servant leadership and role overload was stronger among employees with low impression management motives.

Extended Abstract

The increasing occurrence of scandals such as Enron reflects the reality that business leaders do not always place the needs of others (e.g., subordinates, co-workers, the organization's shareholders and the broader community) above their own, at times compromising the wellbeing of the organization in pursuit of their own self-interest. The notion of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) thus appears particularly relevant in today's business world as it proposes that, when leaders adopt behaviors which transcend their self-interest to serve the interests of all stakeholders, employees experience greater well-being, more positive attitudes, and adopt behaviors which are beneficial to the organization and its members, and the greater community. Perhaps because of its strong ethical component, servant leadership also appears as an exposed core value of many of Fortune Magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work for in America (Ruschman, 2002). In his recent review, van Dierendonck (2011, p. 1230) notes that "Compared to other leadership styles where the ultimate goal is the well-being of the organization, a servant leader is genuinely concerned with serving followers".

Servant leadership has been attracting increasing attention from scholars lately, and research suggests servant leadership behaviors are associated with positive outcomes such as employee commitment, creativity, in-role performance and organizational citizenship

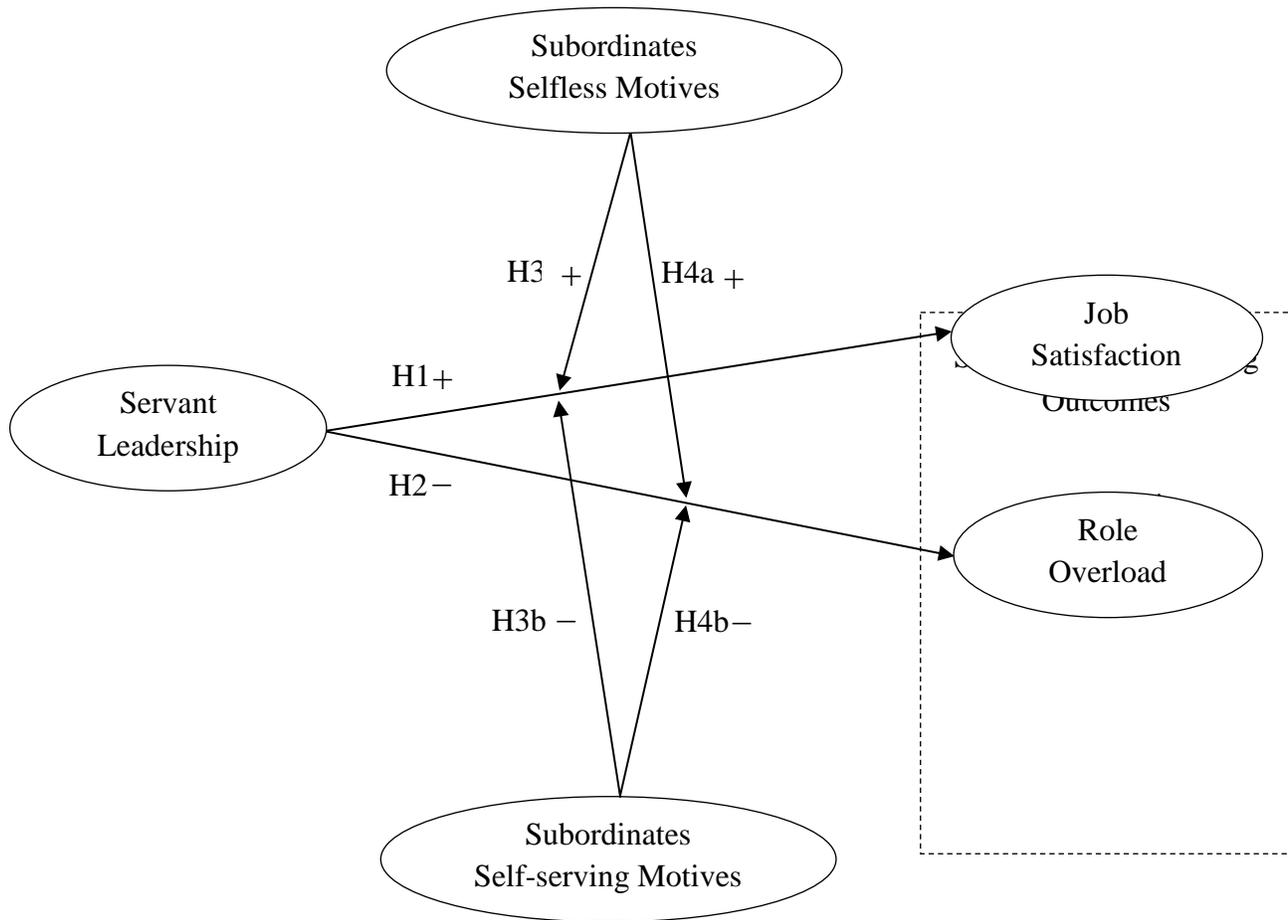
behaviors (OCBs; e.g., Ehrhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2008; Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008). Servant leadership is theoretically distinct from neighboring theories such as transformational and ethical leadership, as servant leadership's emphasis is on fulfilling others' needs, and the servant leader's focus is on multiple stakeholders. Empirical evidence supports this distinction, as servant leadership has been found to contribute variance in employee outcomes such as citizenship behaviors and in-role performance beyond the impact of transformational leadership and leader-member exchange (e.g., Liden et al., 2008; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Yet research on servant leadership is still in its infancy. Finer grained theorizing and testing is required for a more balanced comprehension of the construct, such as understanding whether servant leadership can lead to potentially negative outcomes, as well as conditions under which this leadership style is most effective. The present study seeks to contribute to this line of research.

Specifically, we examined the relationships between servant leadership behaviors and two important metrics of employee wellbeing at work, job satisfaction and role overload, while accounting for subordinates' motivational orientation as a moderator. In so doing, we investigate Liden and colleagues' (in press) contention that servant leadership may not be appropriate for all followers or organizations, exploring conditions under which servant leadership may be less beneficial. Relying on the notions of value congruence and felt obligations for reciprocity between supervisors and subordinates, we contend that employees' broad motivational orientations toward selflessness or self-serving moderate the relationships between servant leadership behaviors and employee wellbeing. Specifically, we propose that servant leadership is more strongly associated with job satisfaction among followers with a strong selfless orientation congruent with that of a servant leader. We also propose that while followers of servant leaders may take on additional tasks as they are likely themselves to incorporate a mandate of service (Hunter et al. in press) which may result in a heavier workload, being able to count on the support of their servant leader prevents them from experiencing role overload as a result. However, we expect this relationship to be moderated by followers' motivational orientation: among followers with a strong self-serving orientation, the expected negative relationship between servant leadership and role overload is likely weaker. Our hypothesized model is depicted in Figure 1.

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FIGURE 1
Hypothesized Model



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