



EXAMINING SERVANT LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES AND EMPLOYEE TRUST

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ABSTRACT

Preparing future leaders is one primal and challenging issue in the contemporary organizations. Within leadership research a new area based on ethical values and linked to positive organizational outcomes is servant leadership. Based on literature servant leadership is a construct that explains key attributes of leaders who first serve and then lead. To support this idea the concept needs more empirical explanation. The premise of this research is that the attributive values of servant leaders play an integral part in capturing and maintaining the trust of its followership. However, not all leadership styles are driven by the idea to reciprocate trust in a positive way. Moreover the absence of trust often leads to issues of a non committed workforce and untrustworthy leadership. A cross sectional survey was used to collect data from (N= 300) employees in a large public organization in Punjab Pakistan. Applying quantitative analysis results supported three out of four hypotheses. This research aims at providing empirical evidence to examine servant leadership and employee trust.

Keywords: Servant leadership attributes, Employee trust

INTRODUCTION

Leadership has had its due share of discussion for a long time. However, its importance and impact on organizational development has now reached a sophisticated level for academics, practitioners and those affected by it. There is a need today for a deeper understanding of this discipline in relation to public organizations and their leadership style. The call for a more holistic and well integrated theory of leadership is the byproduct of an exceptional increase in the way leadership

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influences organizations. For better results to lead, a new area of research linked with ethical leadership, and virtues is servant leadership (Parris and Peachey, 2012). A relatively recent development in literature it invokes interest and attention primarily because service to people and well grounded ethical values lie at its core. Greenleaf (1977) conceptualized the idea of the *servant leader* in a way that a leader was first seen as a servant to others. Although influence is generally considered the key element of leadership, servant leadership changes the focus of this influence by emphasizing the element of service in the leader–follower relationship. Thus shifting from self service to humanistic and governance based. (Van Dierendonck, 2010). Since these leaders germinate a system based on values that serves followership and propagates the importance of values, belief and principles in leadership the paradigm shifts from authoritative and controlling leadership styles to a more mutually trustworthy and service based style of leadership (Covey, 1990). Thus servant leadership is not just a position rather, an opportunity to serve others. Since leadership has the crucial responsibility to put others to task for an effective output & get work done by followers leaders are totally interdependent with them. This surely is not just a blanket assertion but a most wanted outcome in public service. Consequently servant leadership seems plausible as an appropriate choice for the public sector; an area where leaders are facing a number of challenges such as improved service through a motivated workforce (Leslie and Canwell, 2010). Presenting servant leadership as a style which brings positive change in followers is not entirely a new concept because it has been praised to establish positive behavior outcomes in followers (Jaramillo *et al.* 2009; Liden *et al.* 2008). However it could be argued that without trust between the two such developments would not thrive and that the problem of how to maintain the employee trust will always be tracked back to leadership styles! This argument gives way to the research question: *Is there a positive influence of SL (servant leadership) attributes on employees trust?* The article aims to find the answer to this question, based on a research conducted at the Punjab Local Government and Community Development Department.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Modern literature on servant leadership emerged after the essay by Greenleaf entitled, *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf, 1970). He conceptualized the servant as leader from his study of *Journey of the east* by Hesse (1956) from where he picked the idea of a leader who would serve first and then lead. These leaders are identified as people who are naturally motivated to serve their followers. Although servant leadership was coined by Greenleaf (1970, 1977) it has always been there and is included in the teachings of all great religions (Sendjaya and Sarros 2002). Theories of leadership discuss what leaders constitutionally are and their leadership style. Servant leadership as a theory talks about the attributes of the leader and stresses ethical values in leaders. Although some efforts in literature to explain the attributes which constitute a servant leader there is still a lack of research in this area (Farling *et al.* 1999). The examples in literature mostly present a narrative of servant leaders whereas more research is needed to establish its empirical relationship with other important

constructs of organizational studies (Bowman 1997; Northouse 1997; Sendjaya and Sarros 2002). Ever since Bass, (2002) mentioned that servant leadership was an untested theory which would attract attention in time some progress to explain the idea has emerged with conceptualizations in the recent times. These efforts can be described as its measurement and model development. However the theory is still in need of a comprehensive definition (Anderson 2009). It is to be noted that Greenleaf, (1977) only provided a vision but no explanation of its execution. Instead he asked his audience to think and analyze and grow the concept (Frick 2004; Spears 1995). Surely the strength of the theory rests on values and ethical behavior of the leader. It proposes and insists that a leader should first be a servant to followers and then lead them. The theory of servant leadership is still at its developmental stages. However it links to positive behaviors, results and attributes (De Pree, 1989; Russell, 2001; Autry, 2001; Jaworski, 1997; Graham, 1991). One such positive outcome inside organizations is the development of trust among followers. Since servant leadership is linked to servant hood, authenticity, morality and ethics it creates stronger trust in followers towards leaders relative to other leadership approaches (Sendjaya and Pekerti, 2010). The next sections elaborate the construct of servant leadership and define its relationships with employee trust.

Empowerment and employee trust

Empowerment is seen as a motivational concept focused on enabling people (Conger, 2000). Therefore, fostering a proactive, self-confident attitude among followers and, actually giving followers a taste of personal power and decision making freely. Empowerment contributes in valuing people and encourages their personal development (Laub, 1999). For servant leaders empowering behavior includes aspects like encouraging self-directed decision making, information sharing, and coaching for innovative performance (Konczak *et al.* 2000). Moye and Henkin, (2005) found empowerment to be significantly related to interpersonal trust between managers and employees accounting for 29 percent of the variance in interpersonal trust. Hong-bio *et al.* (2013) report the impact of trust in colleagues on their sense of empowerment. It can be deciphered from these definitions that empowerment carries the connotations of consultation with employees in a manner where they are taken into confidence resulting in trust in leadership.

Hypothesis1: Empowerment positively influences employee trust

Humility and employee trust

Humility refers to the ability to put one's own accomplishments and talents in a proper perspective (Patterson, 2003). Another definition of humility is an acknowledgement by a person of capabilities and what he/she does not know (Morris *et al.* 2005). Russell and Stone, (2002) observed that humility translates into serving. Servant-leaders willingly admit that the expertise of others can benefit them. They are eager to learn when there is a requirement (Van Dierendonck, 2011). They exhibit cognition and far sightedness to assess situations where they admit their shortcomings and

encourage and empower followers for the sake of overall benefit of the organization. The above definitions suggested that a servant leader retreats into the background when a task has been successfully accomplished and does not claim credit. Humility and high performance organization factors such as trust were found to be significant by de Waal and Sivro, (2012) in a way that humility positively affected trust.

Hypothesis 2: Humility positively influences employee trust

Stewardship and employee trust

It is the willingness to take responsibility for the larger institution and to go for service instead of control and self-interest (Block, 1993; Spears, 1995). Leaders are said to act not only as caretakers but also as role models for others (Hernandez, 2008). Stewardship can be closely related to sincerity, commitment, and feeling for others in such a way that control and self interest are replaced by true selflessness and a desire to act as guardian. Caldwell *et al.* (2011) discovered that trust increases when leadership depicts ethical values such as stewardship showing a significant and positive relationship between the two.

Hypothesis3: Stewardship positively influences employee trust

Accountability and employee trust

Accountability means holding people accountable for performance they can control (Conger, 2000). This makes accountability a mechanism by which responsibility for outcomes is given to individuals and teams (Konczak *et al.* 2000). It ensures that people know what is expected of a leader. It is a powerful tool to show confidence in one's followers. Moreover it provides boundaries within which one is free to achieve one's goals. It is proposed that the concept of holding trust and being answerable for ones deeds and to deliver tasks with full sincerity and honesty is actually exercising accountability. (Kaynak and Avci, 2012) found that accountability and ethical behavior positively influences trust.

Hypothesis4: Accountability positively influences employee trust

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is extracted and adapted to satisfy the objective of testing the level of trust of the employees. The diagram shows the servant leader essential attributes to develop a relationship of trust between the leaders and the followers. The attributes of; humility, empowerment, accountability, stewardship, are identified as vital and these elements are positioned as the extracted four key characteristics of servant leadership behavior. The review of literature shows certain servant leadership attributes central to the theory and part of servant leader behavior. These have been empirically tested and listed as four basic variables extracted from an extensive

review. Servant-leaders empower and develop people; they show humility, are authentic, accept people for who they are, provide direction, and are stewards who work for the good of the whole (Van Dierendonck, 2010).

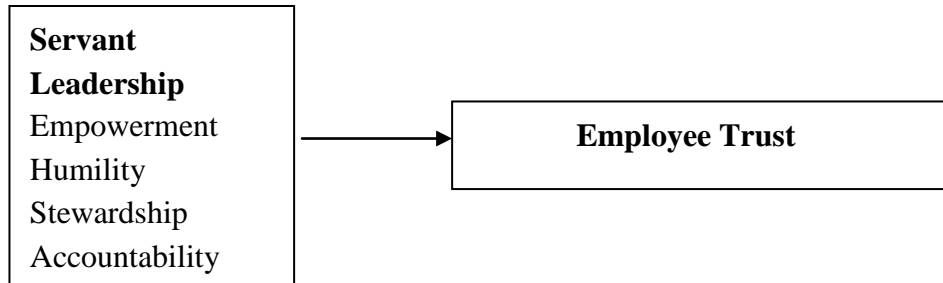


Figure 1: The theoretical framework linking servant leadership employee trust

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data collection

To test the hypotheses, this research used a cross sectional survey approach to collect data on the presence of servant leadership in the organization, and its positive impact on employee trust. The research used convenience sampling to get information from employees of Punjab Local Government & Community Development Department in the province of Punjab Pakistan. In terms of sample size of 300 employees was used. Thus data was collected through personally administered questionnaires. This method saves time and clear item confusion on the spot (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010). There were (225) men and (75) women participants in the research. Four age groups were represented: 18 to 28 (9.7%), 29 to 39 (22.7 %), 40 to 49 (35.6 %) and 50 or above (31.9%). Years of employment ranged from less than one year to over 40 years. The sample included persons in leadership positions in the organization (PLGCD) serving in service grade 17 & 18 of Punjab Government. Several types of organizations were represented, including education (61%), agriculture (19%) and health (20%).

Goodness of measures for instrumentation

The research used a questionnaire with five point Likert scale to obtain data for each construct. A review of literature on servant leadership and trust (Dierendonck, 2010; Dietz and Hartog, 2006; Gillespie and Mann, 2004; Tzafirir and Dolan, 2004) facilitated to adopt a questionnaire with some modifications to better suit the research perspective. Before using statistical tests reliability and normality were run on the data to show an indication of consistency with which the instrument measures the constructs. Results from Cronbach's Alpha reliability test are presented in Table-1. The range of reliability obtained from Cronbach's Alpha test is from zero to one. Closer to one means high level of internal consistency among items. The study shows Cronbach's Alpha values from 0.789 to 0.890, confirming the reliability of the instrument presented in Table-1. The range of

reliability analysis as shown above is from zero to one. A higher level of internal consistency among items is depicted when Cronbach's Alpha is closer to one. In this research the values range from 0.789 to 0.904 therefore confirming the reliability of the instrument. Normality of data was measured from Kurtosis and the level of Skewness. The results in the Table 2 show that the distribution of the data across the scale is normal where the values lie between ± 0 to ± 2 . Therefore the data is normal.

Table 1: Results from reliability test

Variable	No of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Empowerment	7	0.890
Humility	5	0.881
Stewardship	3	0.789
Accountability	3	0.851
Trust	11	0.904

Table 2: Normality analysis

Variables	Skewness	Kurtosis
Empowerment	-1.023	1.060
Humility	- .735	0.474
Stewardship	-1.035	1.551
Accountability	-1.048	1.012
Trust	-0.057	- 0.146

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Pearson's correlation analysis was performed to test whether the relationships between any pairs of variables are statistically significant. The analysis was conducted between empowerment, humility, stewardship, accountability and trust. The outcome of this analysis is Pearson's Correlation coefficient value r and related p values determining the statistical significance of pair of variables, where ($p \leq 0.05$). Results in Table-3 suggest that there is a significant relationship between servant leadership variables and trust. Empowerment, humility, stewardship and accountability are positively related to trust with Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.580$, $r = 0.542$, $r = 0.623$, $r = 0.342$ and significance level of less than 0.001 hence there is a genuine relationship between servant leadership attributes and trust in leadership. Therefore, it's seen that presence of servant leadership attributes increases employee trust in its leadership. The regression models of the relationship between empowerment, humility, stewardship and accountability and trust is significant. The model indicates 48% of the variance in servant leadership attributes. Three hypotheses out of four are found to be significant. The beta values indicate that all servant leadership factors are positively related to trust.

Table 3: Correlation between variables

Servant Leadership Attributes		Empowerment	Humility	Stewardship	Accountability	Trust
Empowerment	Pearson Correlation	1	.502**	.559**	.310**	.580**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
Humility	Pearson Correlation	.502**	1	.615**	.289**	.542**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
Stewardship	Pearson Correlation	.559**	.615**	1	.389**	.623**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
Accountability	Pearson Correlation	.310**	.289**	.389**	1	.342**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
Trust	Pearson Correlation	.580**	.542**	.623**	.342**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4: Regression coefficient result

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	T	Sig.	Hypotheses Result
	B	Std.Error	Beta			
(Constant)	.475	.197	-----	2.415	.016 *	-----
Empowerment	.273	.049	.287	5.521	.000**	Accepted
Humility	.160	.049	.177	3.253	.001**	Accepted
Stewardship	.320	.057	.325	5.593	.000**	Accepted
Accountability	.069	.042	.075	1.658	.098	Rejected

R = 0.701 / R² = 0.484
Dependent Variable: Trust

The major distinctive of this research is the establishment of the strong relationship between servant leadership attributes and employee trust in leadership. Three hypotheses of this study were supported and one was rejected. The study confirms that SL attributes establish interpersonal trust between leaders and employees (Russell, 2001). Trust theory establishes that leader behavior plays a significant role in development of trust in the leader (Bennis, 2002; De Pree, 1989; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Flaharty and Pappas, 2000, Meyer *et al.* 1993). The findings are significant because it provides empirical evidence and support for the model proposing that servant leadership style is an antecedent of trust (Mc Gee-Cooper, 1998; Russell and Stone, 2002). These findings support Greenleaf's (1977) view that servant leaders elicit trust. It also supports models developed by Russell and Stone, (2002) and Farling *et al.*, (1999).

CONCLUSIONS

The research should bear some limitations as well. One limitation was that the sample was collected from Pakistan therefore some cultural and societal factors might affect the positive impact of servant leadership on trust. Therefore cultural differences might moderate this relationship .The

study could also be improved with a larger and culturally diverse sample size and taking into other organizational factors such as commitment, job satisfaction and retention (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Thus leaders can foster trust of employees by practicing servant leadership style. It was also concluded that leadership is a general issue primarily because leaders of today influence the leadership of tomorrow. Therefore leadership style will always be a reference point. As a viable leadership theory servant leadership can provide a value based choice to examine leadership in a new perspective.

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Appendix 1

Variable		Frequency (No.)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	225	75.0
	Female	75	25.0
Age	18 - 28 years old	29	9.7
	29 - 39 years old	68	22.7
	40 - 49 years old	106	35.3
	50 years and above	95	31.7
	Missing	2	.7
Marriage Statues	Single	26	8.7
	Married	270	90.0
	Divorced/Widowed	4	1.3
Education Level	Matriculation	2	.7
	Secondary School	4	1.3
	Bachelor Degree	46	15.3
	Master Degree	237	79.0
	Doctor Degree	11	3.7
Name of Department	Education	183	61.0
	Agriculture	57	19.0
	Health	60	20.0
Years of Services	Lowest through 10 years	82	27.3
	11 to 20 years	85	28.3
	21 to 30 years	104	34.7
	Highest through 31 years	29	9.7

Dimension	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
Empowerment	300	3.7819	.75786	.04375
Humility	300	3.5260	.79647	.04598
Stewardship	300	3.7811	.73244	.04229
Accountability	300	3.8767	.78870	.04554
Servant Leadership	300	3.7414	.58598	.03383
Trust	300	3.5470	.72069	.04161