



Research on the Effect of Servant Leadership on Employee Helping Behavior

Min Huang

School of Economics and Management, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics,
Nanjing, 211106, China

denis_je@163.com

Abstract. Analyzing data from 336 employees across two stages, this study reveals that servant leadership positively influences helping behavior. Employee duty orientation mediates the relationship between servant leadership and helping behavior. Genuine service attribution strengthens the positive impact of servant leadership on duty orientation, whereas insincere service attribution weakens this relationship. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: servant leadership, duty orientation, employee helping behavior, attributions

1 Introduction

Helping behavior refers to employees' voluntary actions in assisting colleagues to resolve work-related challenges (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998) ^[1]. Such behavior not only enhances organizational effectiveness but also contributes to maintaining workplace relationships and fostering positive emotional experiences among employees. Thus, promoting helping behavior has become a focal point of attention in both theoretical and practical domains.

Leaders' daily acts play a crucial role in shaping employees' work attitudes and behaviors. Due to its distinct prosocial characteristics, servant leadership has garnered increasing attention in recent years for its impact on helping behavior. Servant leaders' focus on "serving others" can not only improve employees' identification but also can stimulate employees' willingness to care for and assist others (Liden et al., 2008) ^[2]. However, existing research on the impact of servant leadership on helping behavior remains fragmented, and the underlying mechanisms warrant further investigation. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between servant leadership and helping behavior.

As agents of organizations, leaders are often the models of employee learning and emulation. Therefore, this study builds upon social learning theory to address how servant leadership influences helping behavior. Social learning theory posits that models' behaviors can induce imitative behaviors by altering imitators' cognitive states (Bandura, 1977) ^[3]. Servant leadership aims to meet employee needs and advance collective

interests (Usman et al., 2024) [4], which sets a positive example that garners employees' attention and observation, and thus stimulates their sense of duty towards others. Driven by this sense of duty, employees are inclined to engage in helping behavior. Therefore, we choose duty orientation as a mediator. Furthermore, social learning theory highlights that imitators' understanding of models' behavioral intentions significantly influences their learning process (Bandura, 1977) [3]. In this study, we characterize employees' understanding of servant leadership intentions through attributional lenses, including genuine and insincere attributions. Genuine attribution enhances identification with leaders' role as models, thereby strengthening duty orientation. Conversely, insincere attribution diminishes identification with leaders' service-oriented behaviors, resulting in less pronounced improvements in duty orientation. Taken together, this research first examines the impact of servant leadership on helping behavior, then clarifies the mediating role of duty orientation, and the moderating effect of different attributions.

2 Hypothesis Development

2.1 Servant Leadership and Helping Behavior

Servant leaders' qualities such as empathy, responsibility for others' growth, and concern for collective development contribute to cultivating a service-oriented workplace culture. This may encourage employees to perceive helping others as endorsed by the organization. In this case, employees may actively learn from servant leaders and increase assistance to colleagues to gain recognition from leaders and the organization. Additionally, positive interactions between servant leaders and employees can enhance employees' work energy. Driven by this work energy, employees may naturally feel inclined to assist colleagues facing challenges, thus embodying the care for and commitment to the collective similar to their leaders. Thus, we propose:

H1: Servant leadership is positively associated with helping behavior.

2.2 The Mediating Role of Duty Orientation

Duty orientation reflects employees' cognitive sense of responsibility towards organizational development and member well-being (Hannah et al., 2014) [5]. Servant leadership not only cares for individual employees but also encourages cooperation, mutual tolerance, and mutual assistance among employees. Under the guidance of servant leadership, employees recognize the importance of collective development, thereby strengthening their duty orientation. Furthermore, servant leaders signal to employees the organization's concern for their interests (Liden et al., 2014) [6], leading employees to perceive their fate as intertwined with the organization's, which further enhances their duty orientation (Hannah et al., 2014) [5]. Subsequently, they may emulate leaders by offering help to colleagues (Eva et al., 2021) [7]. Moreover, employees with duty orientation tend to perceive helping colleagues as the "right thing to do" (Hannah et al., 2014) [5]. Consequently, employees are motivated to actively help colleagues. Hence, we hypothesize:

H2: Duty orientation mediates the relationship between servant leadership and helping behavior.

2.3 The Moderating Role of Attributions

Genuine service attribution refers to employees perceiving servant leadership as genuinely aimed at helping them, whereas insincere service attribution refers to employees perceiving servant leadership as an impression management strategy (Lam et al., 2007)^[8]. Employees with genuine service attribution believe that leaders' care and assistance stem from genuine concern, demonstrating positive and admirable qualities. In this context, employees are deeply drawn to servant leaders, considering them as significant learning models, thereby enhancing duty orientation. Conversely, employees with insincere attribution view leaders' service performance as intending to enhance their influence and reputation within the organization (Wen & Cai, 2025)^[9]. As such, employees' identification with servant leaders decreases, making it challenging for them to interpret observed servant leadership as indications of responsibility towards the organization and colleagues. Thus, we propose:

H3a: Genuine service attribution strengthens the positive impact of servant leadership on duty orientation.

H3b: Insincere service attribution weakens the positive impact of servant leadership on duty orientation.

3 Method

3.1 Sample

To mitigate the common method bias, we administered the questionnaire in two phases with a one-month interval in between. In the first phase, we invited 477 employees to assess servant leadership and servant leadership attributions, and report demographic information. We received 369 valid responses. In the second phase, we invited these 369 employees to evaluate duty orientation and helping behavior, and received 336 valid responses.

3.2 Measures

We measured servant leadership with Liden et al.'s (2008)^[2] scale ($\alpha = 0.87$). Following previous studies (Lee et al., 2023)^[10], we asked employees to assess the motivation of the 7 items of servant leadership (α for genuine service was 0.85 and for insincere service was 0.88). Duty orientation was assessed using Hannah et al.'s (2014)^[5] ($\alpha = 0.90$). Podsakoff et al.'s (1990)^[11] scale was adopted to measure helping behavior ($\alpha = 0.75$). Responses ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. We controlled for gender, age, and education.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 1, the correlations between variables were in line with expectations.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Servant leadership	0.75				
2. Genuine service	0.62***	0.88			
3. Insincere service	-0.61***	-0.61***	0.86		
4. Duty orientation	0.62***	0.63***	-0.54***	0.75	
5. Helping behavior	0.36***	0.36***	-0.31***	0.58***	0.79
M	3.93	3.70	2.43	3.97	3.93
SD	0.69	0.85	0.99	0.55	0.57

Note. N = 336; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; The diagonal is the square root of AVE.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

We conducted linear regressions with SPSS 25.0 to test our hypotheses. The results are summarized in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, servant leadership had a positive impact on helping behavior ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H1.

Besides, servant leadership positively affected duty orientation ($\beta = 0.67, p < 0.001$) and duty orientation positively affected helping behavior ($\beta = 0.61, p < 0.001$). Bootstrap results suggested that the indirect effect of servant leadership on helping behavior via duty orientation was 0.33, and the 95% CI was [0.24, 0.42], not containing 0. Therefore, H2 was supported.

Table 2. Regression analysis

Variable	DO				HB		
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Gender	0.12*	-0.04	-0.03	-0.06	0.02	0.07	0.10*
Age	0.09	0.17***	0.01**	0.01**	0.12*	0.16**	0.01
Education	-0.13*	-0.03	-0.01	-0.01	-0.07	-0.01	0.01
SL		0.67***	0.42***	0.47***		0.38***	0.01
DO							0.61***
GS			0.17**				
IS				-0.15***			
SL × GS			0.09**				
SL × IS				-0.16***			
R ²	0.03	0.46	0.50	0.54	0.01	0.15	0.35
F	4.53**	72.90***	55.10***	63.65***	2.46**	54.86***	35.08***

Note. Abbreviations: SL, servant leadership; DO, duty orientation; GS, genuine service; IS, insincere service; HB, helping behavior.

Furthermore, the interaction term between servant leadership and genuine service had a positive influence on duty orientation ($\beta = 0.09, p < 0.01$). The positive impact of servant leadership on duty orientation was stronger when genuine service was high ($\beta = 0.50, p < 0.001$) than low ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$). Therefore, H3a received support.

Moreover, the interaction term between servant leadership and insincere service had a negative influence on duty orientation ($\beta = -0.16, p < 0.001$). The positive impact of servant leadership on duty orientation was weaker when insincere service was high ($\beta = 0.31, p < 0.001$) than low ($\beta = 0.63, p < 0.001$). Therefore, H3b received support.

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

First, despite previous research confirming the role of servant leadership in stimulating helping behavior, the underlying mechanisms remain inadequately explored. Drawing on social learning theory, this research introduces duty orientation as a mediating variable. In so doing, it offers a perspective of role-modeling for understanding the relationship between servant leadership and helping behavior. Second, previous research on the effectiveness of servant leadership has predominantly explored organization-related factors (Eva et al., 2021)^[7] and leader-related factors (Eva et al., 2019)^[12], while overlooking employees' interpretations of the motivations behind servant leadership. Through investigating the moderating role of two attribution, this study extends literature on servant leadership effectiveness.

5.2 Practical Implications

Firstly, organizations aiming to promote helpful behaviors can emphasize the reinforcement of servant leadership. When recruiting and selecting managers, organizations should consider servant leadership as a crucial indicator. Specifically, organizations can offer relevant training programs to help managers better understand and practice the principles of servant leadership. In this way, a culture of care and support can be fostered within the management ranks, encouraging collaboration and support among employees. Secondly, organizations should focus on enhancing employees' sense of duty and belonging. This can be achieved through the regular organization of team-building activities, such as teamwork exercises, social events, and outdoor retreats. Thirdly, managers should be mindful of their approach when serving employees to prevent misunderstandings about their intentions. For instance, managers must continuously improve their communication methods to ensure accurate understanding of employees' feelings and needs. They should adopt an active communication strategy, engaging in regular one-on-one discussions with employees to keep abreast of their work status and personal challenges. Moreover, managers should adjust their service behaviors in real-time based on employees' feedback, demonstrating their appreciation and respect for employee opinions. This ongoing communication and adjustment not only helps managers meet employees' needs more effectively but also increases employees' trust and satisfaction with their managers.

6 Conclusion

In this study, we investigate how servant leadership influences helping behavior through duty orientation and how employees' interpretations of the motivations behind servant leadership moderate this process. The findings indicate that servant leadership have a positive effect on helping behavior. Duty orientation mediates the relationship between servant leadership and helping behavior. Genuine service attributed motivation strengthens the impact of servant leadership on helping behavior while insincere service attributed motivation weakens the impact of servant leadership on helping behavior.

References

1. Van Dyne, L., & LePine, J. A. (1998). Helping and voice extra-role behaviors: Evidence of construct and predictive validity. *Academy of Management Journal*, 41(1), 108-119.
2. Liden, R. C., Wayne, S. J., Zhao, H., & Henderson, D. (2008). Servant leadership: Development of a multidimensional measure and multi-level assessment. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(2), 161-177.
3. Bandura, A., Walters, R. H. Social learning theory. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1977.
4. Usman, M., Ali, M., Soetan, G. T., Ayoko, O. B., & Berber, A. (2024). Seeing others' side to serve: Understanding how and when servant leadership impacts employee knowledge-hiding behaviors. *Human Relations*, 77(1), 3-28.
5. Hannah, S. T., Jennings, P. L., Bluhm, D., Peng, A. C., & Schaubroeck, J. M. (2014). Duty orientation: Theoretical development and preliminary construct testing. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 123(2), 220-238.
6. Liden, R. C., Wayne, S. J., Liao, C., & Meuser, J. D. (2014). Servant leadership and serving culture: Influence on individual and unit performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 57(5), 1434-1452.
7. Eva, N., Sendjaya, S., Prajogo, D., & Madison, K. (2021). Does organizational structure render leadership unnecessary? Configurations of formalization and centralization as a substitute and neutralizer of servant leadership. *Journal of Business Research*, 129, 43-56.
8. Lam, W., Huang, X., & Snape, E. D. (2007). Feedback-seeking behavior and leader-member exchange: Do supervisor-attributed motives matter? *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(2), 348-363.
9. Wen, N., & Cai, R. (2025). Laughing it off: How does leader humor alleviate employees' compassion fatigue in service failure? *Tourism Management*, 106, 104980.
10. Lee, B. Y., Kim, T. Y., Kim, S., Liu, Z., & Wang, Y. (2023). Socially responsible human resource management and employee performance: the roles of perceived external prestige and employee human resource attributions. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 33(4), 828-845.
11. Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Moorman, R. H., & Fetter, R. (1990). Transformational leader behaviors and their effects on followers' trust in leader, satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 1(2), 107-142.
12. Eva, N., Robin, M., Sendjaya, S., Van Dierendonck, D., & Liden, R.C. (2019). Servant leadership: A systematic review and call for future research[J]. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(1), 111-132.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

