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Impact of Servant Leadership on employees' Innovative Behavior: Role of Job Autonomy,
Affective Commitment, and Demonstrated Responsibility

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Abstract

The present study explores the effect of servant leadership on employee innovative behavior. Specifically, it looks into the mediating role of employee affective commitment and demonstrated responsibility in this relationship. Augmenting this, it investigates into the moderating role of job autonomy on the proposed mediation mechanisms underlying the liaison between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior. Analysis of multi-source data gathered from IT organizations in India, reveals that: (1) servant leadership is positively related to employee innovative behavior, (2) affective commitment partially mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior, (3) demonstrated responsibility partially mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior, (4) affective commitment and demonstrated responsibility sequentially and fully mediate the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior, and (5) job autonomy moderates the sequential mediation relationship between servant leadership, affective commitment, demonstrated responsibility and employee innovative behavior. Lastly, the study proffers key implications, limitations, and future research directions.

Keywords: servant leadership; job autonomy; affective commitment; demonstrated responsibility; innovative behavior

Article type: Research paper

Introduction

Employee innovation is considered as the key contributor to organization's productivity (Anderson, Potočník, & Zhou, 2014). Though tantamount to creativity, innovation which refers to idea implementation majorly resonates with identifiable gains, and so organizations are in search for ways to encourage innovative behavior in employees (Amabile, 1988; Scott, & Bruce, 1994). In this regard, research on the liaison between leadership and employee innovative behavior has burgeoned, with various forms of leadership such as transformational, empowering and ethical suggested as key leader behaviors that foster innovation in employees (Feng, Huang, & Zhang, 2016; Yidong, & Xinxin, 2013). Servant leadership, a crucial leader behavior known for its propensity "to serve" (Liden et al, 2008) has of late, been linked to employees' innovative behavior (Wang, Meng, & Cai, 2019), however, the mechanisms underlying this link have been suggested to merit further attention (Liden et al, 2014; Wang et al., 2019). Imperatively, the extant leadership-innovation scholarship has as well urged researchers to examine the interplay of leadership, diverse individual and contextual factors, and employee innovation so as to construct more inclusive models of the leader-innovation relationship (Hughes et al., 2018). Catering to these research gaps, the current study explores in-depth the impact of servant leadership on employee innovative behavior, in particular, it investigates into the mediating role of employee affective commitment and demonstrated responsibility in the *servant leadership – innovative behavior* relationship.

The existing leadership literature contends that the impact of leadership on employee attitudes and behaviors, rather than being stand alone, is contingent on various other dynamics within the organization. Job autonomy, a key job characteristic (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) has been argued to play a crucial role in this context (Cai et al., 2018). Reflecting the extent of discretion offered to an employee to schedule work tasks/procedures

or make decisions at work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), job autonomy offers employees flexibility at work. Prior research relates it positively to manifold outcomes such as increased retention (Ahuja et al., 2007), employees' psychological health (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007), organizational commitment (Ahuja et al., 2007), work satisfaction (Schulz et al., 1995) and performance (Shirom et al., 2006). At the same time, some studies posit no significant relationship between job autonomy and outcomes such as organizational commitment (Parker, 2003). Keeping in view this discrepancy, the current study argues that job autonomy interacts with servant leadership to influence employees' commitment to the organization, specifically affective commitment, and their levels of demonstrated responsibility, which in turn impacts their innovative behavior. Further, although the various forms of commitment are associated with diverse employee behaviors, relatively less research has attended to the intervening role of affective commitment in the leadership and employee innovative behavior relationship (Iqbal, Nazir, & Ahmad, 2022). This study therefore examines affective commitment as a mediator in the association of servant leadership with innovative behavior. Next, demonstrated responsibility refers to taking up of responsibility towards various duties at work (Stamper, Masterson, & Knapp, 2009). Stamper et al. (2009) suggest that employee demonstrated responsibility is likely to result into challenging behaviors. However, its relationship with innovative behavior, in particular, its role in the leadership-employee innovation relationship hasn't been explored. So, the other objective of this research is to explore demonstrated responsibility as a key mediating mechanism linking servant leadership with innovative behavior. In sum, this study proposes an all-encompassing model that encapsulates the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior considering the mediating role of affective commitment and demonstrated responsibility and the moderating role of job autonomy.

Hypotheses Development

Servant Leadership - Innovative Behavior

Servant leaders are characterized as honest, trustworthy, and reliable; they demonstrate concern for the development of their followers (Liden et al., 2008). As per the social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964), such leader behavior is expected to encourage a social exchange process, whereby followers may feel obliged to reciprocate the leader's such behavior towards them. Servant leaders on account of their aspects provide a psychologically sound climate to followers and facilitate positive emotions in them (Yoshida et al. 2014); this broadens followers' thought-action repertoires, thereby give way to their engagement in creative problem solving (Fredrickson, 2001). Furthermore, servant leaders empower followers and encourage employee voice (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2008); this may encourage followers to identify problems and offer novel and constructive solutions to them. In congruence, some studies have corroborated that servant leadership stimulates creativity in employees. All in all, it can be concluded that:

H1: Servant leadership is positively related to employee innovative behavior.

Affective Commitment as Mediator of the Servant Leadership - Innovative Behavior relationship

Affective commitment refers to employees' emotional affinity for the organization (Foley, Ngo, & Loi, 2016; Meyer et al., 2002). When it comes to influence of leaders on followers' attitudes, the tenets of the social exchange theory offer a credible explanatory base (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). Accordingly, this study surmises that servant leadership is likely to influence followers' affective commitment to the organization. Servant leaders are trustworthy, honest, and fair; they exhibit integrity, and encourage transparency and open communication; followers of such leaders in their reciprocity endeavors are therefore expected to show loyalty to them as well as the organization (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Ko

& Hur, 2014; Ko et al., 2018). In psychologically empowering employees, servant leaders accentuate followers' levels of commitment (Qing et al., 2019).

Affective committed employees put in dedicated efforts at work (Qing et al., 2019). They demonstrate higher levels of job satisfaction and work performance (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001), and so are expected to exert added efforts at work. Prior research as well substantiates organizational commitment as a key precursor to creative performance in employees (Semedo et al., 2016). Considering the above arguments, it can be hypothesized that:

H2: Affective commitment mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior.

Demonstrated Responsibility as Mediator of the Servant Leadership - Innovative Behavior relationship

Servant leaders foster among employees a sense of meaningfulness at work (Liden et al, 2008). They garner trustworthy relations with their followers (Liden et al, 2008); such relations psychologically connect the followers with the leader as well as the organization, and inspire a sense of responsibility towards them (Masterson & Stamper, 2003). Also, by exhibiting a selfless attitude of concern for and service of others, they manifest responsible behavior. In accordance with social exchange, this may engender in followers an onus to reciprocate by demonstrating responsible behavior towards the leader and the organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gouldner, 1960). Consequently, followers may endeavor to take up more challenges or initiatives at work, take up risks and put in added efforts in their tasks (Bandura, 1986; Grant & Ashford, 2008). That is, followers are likely to exhibit innovative behavior with demonstrated responsibility as the stimulus. Prior research as well suggests that individual innovation relies on the extent of responsibility an individual takes (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010). Demonstrated responsibility can thus be referred to as a

social exchange medium (Stamper et al., 2009) through which servant leaders can spur innovative behavior in followers.

H3: Demonstrated responsibility mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior.

Affective Commitment and Demonstrated Responsibility as Sequential Mediators of the Servant Leadership - Innovative Behavior relationship

The present study proposes a sequential mediation by affective commitment and demonstrated responsibility in the association between servant leadership and innovative behavior. Sequential mediation conveys that there are two variables intervening the relationship between the independent and dependent variables such that the independent variable (servant leadership in the proposed model) effects the first intervening variable (affective commitment in the proposed model) which serially effects the second intervening variable (demonstrated responsibility in the proposed model) which in turn effects the dependent variable (innovative behavior in the proposed model). Masterson and Stamper (2003) suggest that employees who feel affectionately attached exhibit higher levels of responsibility at work. Similarly, Ribeiro et al. (2022) mention that affective commitment towards the organization encourages responsive responsible actions by employees. Building on these arguments, the study contends that:

H4: Affective commitment and Demonstrated responsibility sequentially mediate the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior.

Job autonomy as moderator

In addition to positing mediating mechanisms to explicate the servant leadership-innovative behavior relationship, the study underlines that these mechanisms accentuate in context wherein job autonomy is high. Job characteristics can moderate the impact of leader behavior

on follower attitudes and behaviors (Hackman & Oldman, 1976; House, 1996). Characteristics such as job autonomy offer employees with the discretion to carry out or schedule tasks in desired ways. A low autonomy work context is more structured, offers employees less latitude at work, thereby, constraining exercise of various behaviors on their part. As per Kerr and Jermier (1978), such context may diminish the influence of leaders on follower outcomes. In contrast, a high autonomy context provides employees with the leeway to exercise their discretion; and since such context is devoid of rigid rules pertaining to work tasks and behaviors, it offers employees greater opportunities to interact with the leader for direction, and so get influenced by leader behavior/conduct (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & de Hoogh, 2013). In such scenario, the impact of servant leadership on follower outcomes is expected to be more salient. That is, high autonomy will better enable followers to respond to their servant leader by demonstrating greater levels of affective commitment and/or demonstrated responsibility and subsequent engagement in innovative behaviors. While, this social exchange process might not be feasible in a low autonomy context, wherein, even if followers are willing to reciprocate the servant leader's conduct, they may not have enough freedom to proceed. So, the influence of servant leadership on follower outcomes is expected to be less salient in this situation. All in all, it is surmised that servant leadership effectuates employee innovative behavior through affective commitment and/or demonstrated responsibility more amid high rather than low autonomy context. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H5: Job autonomy moderates the mediation relationship between servant leadership, affective commitment and employee innovative behavior, such that the relationship is stronger when job autonomy is higher.

H6: Job autonomy moderates the mediation relationship between servant leadership, demonstrated responsibility and employee innovative behavior, such that the relationship is stronger when job autonomy is higher.

H7: Job autonomy moderates the sequential mediation relationship between servant leadership, affective commitment, demonstrated responsibility and employee innovative behavior, such that the relationship is stronger when job autonomy is higher.

Figure 1 shows the research model encompassing the study hypotheses.

Figure 1

Methodology

Sample

For collecting data, questionnaires accompanied with the cover letter were administered to 254 employees and their peers belonging to IT organizations in India. The cover letter explained the purpose of the study, and ensured confidentiality of responses and anonymity of the respondents. The focal employees responded to items corresponding to their immediate supervisor's servant leadership, job autonomy, affective commitment. And their peers responded to questions corresponding to their demonstrated responsibility and innovative behavior. In total, 168 apt employee-peer responses (i.e., response rate = 66%) were obtained. A majority of the respondents were males (65%), in the age range 26-36 years (53%), and had experience in the range 3-7 years with the current organization (61%). This multi-source data collection aided in diminishing worries surrounding Common Method Bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012).

Measures

Items for the survey instrument were taken from standardized questionnaires as in prior literature. Servant leadership was measured using the 6-item Servant Leadership Behavior

Scale (SLBS-6) by Sendjaya et al. (2019) ($\alpha = .90$). A sample item is “My supervisor uses power to serve others, not to reach his/her individual goals”. Job autonomy was measured using 6 items from Jackson et al. (1993) ($\alpha = .86$). An example item is “I decide how to go about getting my job done”. Affective commitment was measured using 7 items from the affective commitment scale by Allen and Meyer (1990) ($\alpha = .91$). A sample item is “This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me”. Demonstrated responsibility was measured using 4 items as in Kalshoven et al., (2013) ($\alpha = .85$) (for instance, “This employee takes responsibility at work” and “This employee is dependable and can be counted upon”), and innovative behavior was measured using De Jong and Den Hartog’s (2010) 10-item scale ($\alpha = .89$) (for instance, “This employee finds new approaches to execute tasks”). Since demographic variables of employee age, gender, and experience can probably impact individual innovation, in line with extant research, these were utilized as controls. A five-point Likert scale with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* was employed.

Analysis and results

On employing Exploratory Factor Analysis, PCA yielded five components with Eigen values greater than one, and the first factor demonstrating 23% variance, demonstrating that Common Method Bias was not a problem in the study. Next, application of Confirmatory Factor Analysis revealed satisfactory fit of the model with the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.101$, GFI = .864, AGFI = .756, RMSEA = .060, CFI = .910) (Hair et al., 2010). Further, given that for each of the constructs, the composite reliability value was greater than 0.7, factor loadings of the items were above 0.7, and Average Variance Extracted was greater than 0.5, the convergent validity of the constructs was ascertained. Also, since for each of the constructs, Average Variance Expected was greater than Maximum Shared Variance and Average

Shared Variance, and the inter-construct correlation values were less than square root of Average Variance Expected, discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2010) was found.

Further, to examine the hypotheses, SEM was employed. With regards to the hypothesis H1, positive and significant estimate ($\beta=.560$, $p<0.05$) indicated that servant leadership was positively related to employee innovative behavior. Pertaining to H2 and H3 however, the estimates revealed that affective commitment ($\beta=.546$, $p<0.05$) and demonstrated responsibility ($\beta=.457$, $p<0.05$) partially mediated the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior. As regards H4, a serial mediation was found with both affective commitment and demonstrated responsibility as intervening the servant leadership and innovative behavior relationship ($\beta=.436$, $p<0.05$), and the mediation was full. PROCESS was applied to decipher the moderated mediation hypotheses (Hayes et al., 2017). For H5 and H6, it was found that job autonomy did not moderate the meditational relationships, *servant leadership-affective commitment-innovative behavior*, and *servant leadership-demonstrated responsibility-innovative behavior*. However, job autonomy moderated the sequential mediation relationship *servant leadership-affective commitment-demonstrated responsibility-innovative behavior* as indicated by the significant indirect effect estimates at various levels of job autonomy (at low level = 0.06, CI: 0.03, 0.14 and at high level = 0.15, CI: 0.05, 0.17). Precisely, job autonomy surfaced as the moderator in the serial mediation relationship between servant leadership and innovative behavior as the relationship was stronger amid high than low job autonomy (see Figure 2), thus supporting H7.

Figure 2

Discussion and implications

The results corroborate that servant leadership is positively related to employee innovative behavior, affective commitment partially mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior, demonstrated responsibility partially mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior, affective commitment and demonstrated responsibility sequentially and fully mediate the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior, and job autonomy moderates the sequential mediation relationship between servant leadership, affective commitment, demonstrated responsibility and employee innovative behavior, such that the relationship is stronger when job autonomy is higher. These findings elaborate the process by which servant leadership impacts employee innovative behavior. In so doing they add to the extant leader impact scholarship, with employee innovative behavior as the key impact outcome (Hughes et al., 2018). Augmenting this, the results corresponding to the mediation mechanisms by affective commitment and demonstrated responsibility highlight the pertinence of the social exchange perspective in the association of leader behaviors with employee outcomes. The moderating effect of job autonomy shows that the impact of leadership on employee behavior is contingent on the level of autonomy offered by the work context, and therefore for servant leader behavior to be effective in garnering employee innovation, providing employees' with the necessary autonomy is imperative. Bereft of autonomy, employees might not be able to respond to their supervisor's servant leadership behavior with organizationally beneficial productive behaviors, thereby rendering leader behavior ineffective.

The current study offers some key implications. Organizations are suggested to foster servant leadership behavior at the workplace, by conducting training and development programs focusing on imbibing the servant leadership behavioral aspects in employees. Furthermore, they are encouraged to take measures at enhancing job autonomy, providing employees with the discretion to not only schedule their tasks but also exercise apt behaviors

at work. Also, greater interaction between the leader and employees should be facilitated so that constructive social exchange is underway and leads to productive employee outcomes.

Limitations and future research directions

The present study has a few limitations. First, it adopted a single-level approach considering the nature of variables (servant leadership at individual level since perceived servant leadership was taken into consideration; job autonomy, affective commitment, demonstrated responsibility and innovative behavior were taken up at the individual level). However, since a multilevel approach will facilitate further understanding, multilevel research to ascertain the hypotheses is suggested. Second, since the study employed a cross-sectional approach, a longitudinal approach will furnish further insights into the hypothesized relationships. Lastly, since the study is limited to the Indian IT organizations, generalizability can't be ascertained; and therefore, future research in different industries and geographies is suggested.

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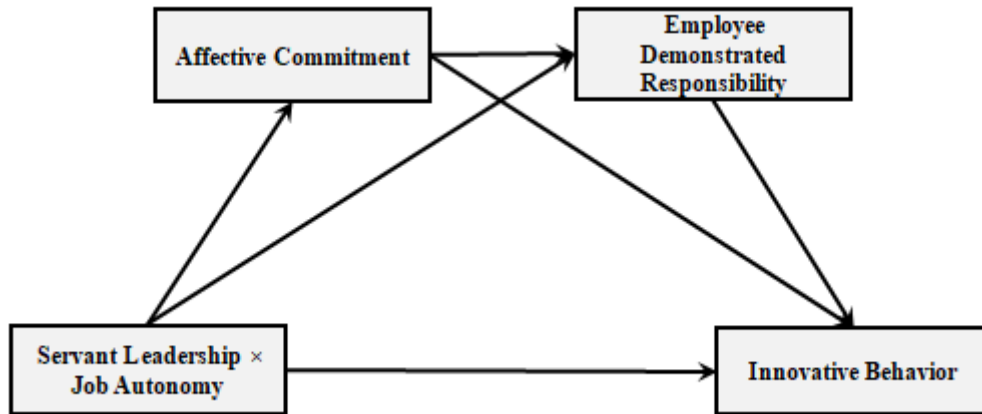
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Appendix

List of figures

Figure 1: Proposed model



H1: Servant Leadership → Innovative Behavior

H2: Servant Leadership → Affective Commitment → Innovative Behavior

H3: Servant Leadership → Employee Demonstrated Responsibility → Innovative Behavior

H4: Servant Leadership → Affective Commitment → Employee Demonstrated Responsibility → Innovative Behavior

H5: Servant Leadership × Job Autonomy → Affective Commitment → Innovative Behavior

H6: Servant Leadership × Job Autonomy → Employee Demonstrated Responsibility → Innovative Behavior

H7: Servant Leadership × Job Autonomy → Affective Commitment → Employee Demonstrated Responsibility → Innovative Behavior

Figure 2: Moderating role of job autonomy

