

Servant Leadership and Follower Impact: Using Role Inversion to Enhance Employee Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the concept of servant leadership by linking it to an outcome of interest to employers in many organizations: employee job satisfaction. We wish to examine the questions: how and why does servant leadership have an impact on employee job satisfaction?

We begin by addressing the question: What is job satisfaction and how might it be affected by servant leadership? A review of literature on job satisfaction will provide the foundation needed to understand what the research says about the antecedents of job satisfaction. Next, we examine what personal qualities are associated with those who are servant leaders. However, lists of descriptive leadership qualities and an understanding of the organizational outcome of job satisfaction and its antecedents are not sufficient to explain how servant leadership may impact job satisfaction experienced by subordinates in the workplace. A review of social exchange literature, specifically leader member exchange (LMX) and its corollary, leader role inversion, provide conceptual underpinnings to explain how supervisor behaviors may also influence, through servant leadership, job satisfaction. We offer a theoretical connection between commitment to serve and role inversion behaviors and their impact on servant leadership. We then link servant leadership to employee job satisfaction.

Introduction

Since its introduction by Greenleaf (1977), the concept of servant leadership has attracted both interest and criticism. Interest has come from those who believe that leadership should be ethical and reflect humanistic values of service and compassion to counter-balance the de-humanizing effect of market forces influencing bottom-line economic outcomes. Criticism has come from those who would dismiss servant leadership as naively altruistic and lacking in coherent theory backed by sound empirical research. Servant leadership may be defined in terms of the behaviors displayed by leaders in actual situations, but also by the motivation, values, and qualities of relationships between leaders and followers. It must be measured, however, not simply in terms of attributes of the leader, but by their actions and -- more importantly -- by their effects on followers. This paper seeks to examine the concept of servant leadership by linking it to an outcome of interest to employers in many organizations--employee job satisfaction. We wish to examine the questions: how and why does servant leadership have an impact on employee job satisfaction?

We begin by addressing the question: What is job satisfaction and how might it be affected by servant leadership? A review of literature on job satisfaction provides the foundation needed to understand what the research says about the antecedents of job satisfaction. Next, we examine what personal qualities are associated with those who are servant leaders and indicate the commitment to serve. However, lists of descriptive leadership qualities and an understanding of the organizational outcome of job satisfaction and its antecedents are not sufficient to explain how servant leadership may impact job satisfaction experienced by subordinates in the workplace. A review of social exchange literature, specifically leader member exchange (LMX) and its corollary, leader role inversion, provides a conceptual framework to explain how supervisor behaviors may also influence job satisfaction through servant leadership. We offer a theoretical connection between commitment to serve and role inversion behaviors and their impact on servant leadership. We then link servant leadership to employee job satisfaction.

Job Satisfaction

For many years researchers have examined the importance of job satisfaction in the workplace (Kim, 2002; Drucker, 1954; Likert, 1967; Ouchi, 1981). Job satisfaction is important due to its relationship with lower turnover and increased productivity and quality of work life, and is also associated with improved organizational performance, particularly in service-based organizations (Archibald, 2006; Shaver & Lacey, 2003; Yarkin, Azoury, & Doumit, 2003). A challenge facing many industries is to identify factors contributing to job satisfaction and to use those factors in job design to maximize retention and to improve recruitment (Archibald, 2006). Studies have found that lack of recognition and lack of respect (Spence Laschinger, 2004) experienced by employees are cited as reasons for leaving. When employees are satisfied in their work, they are less likely to change jobs (Sumner & Townsend, 2003). Yarkin, Azoury, and Doumit (2003) also found that respect from supervisors, among other factors, is an important determinant of job satisfaction.

In an early meta-analysis of over five thousand articles on job satisfaction, Cranny, Smith, and Stone (1992) offers this consensus definition: ‘job satisfaction is an affective (i.e. emotional) reaction to a job that results from the incumbent’s comparison of actual outcomes with those that are desired or expected.’ Locke (1976) found that an individual’s assessment of job satisfaction derives from a dual value judgment: the discrepancy between what the individual wants and what he or she perceives as getting, and the importance of what is wanted. Other studies focus on identifying and examining the antecedents of job satisfaction, with various designs aiming to measure the effect of both content and process factors (Staples & Higgins, 1998). Organ and Near (1985) point out that most job satisfaction scales have tended to load heavily on cognitive factors at the expense of the affective dimension, i.e. surveys tend to ask questions about the more objective environmental aspects of the job (pay scales, working conditions, etc) and have not given equal attention to more subtle process and relational aspects of the work experience. Chiu and Chen (2005) speak of job satisfaction as performing a vital “mediating role” between job characteristics and organizational citizenship behavior. The literature shows a recent trend studying the relationship of ethical climate and supervisory trust (Mulki, 2006), and ‘other-oriented values’ (Arciniega & Gonzalez, 2005) on job satisfaction.

This paper aims to extend this focus and examine servant leadership qualities and reciprocity between leaders and followers as a key factor in the affective component of job satisfaction. This research aims to describe how this affective component may be influenced by the relationship between the worker and his/her leader or manager that comes from a servant leader orientation. For example, Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) performed a meta-analysis of existing literature on servant leadership and identified five variables in the servant leader-follower transformational model: vision, influence, credibility, trust, and service. Of these, the variables of trust and service may contribute most to employee satisfaction.

In the following section we will examine current literature describing the characteristics of servant leadership. Then we will theoretically connect the qualities of servant leadership and the outcome of job satisfaction using extant theories in social psychology: leader member exchange theory and particularly its subcategory role inversion.

Servant Leadership and Commitment to Serve

Robert K. Greenleaf (1904 -1990), a scholar of personnel and management research at AT&T and founder of the Center for Applied Ethics, introduced the idea of servant leadership in a 1970 privately circulated essay, "The Servant as Leader" (1977), which encouraged young people to take on more responsibility as future leaders. Since that time there has been much discussion of this paradoxical idea that the best way to lead in a way that values others, lives up to high moral and ethical standards, and transforms subordinates into leaders themselves, is to first choose to serve. The servant leader is different from other leaders who serve personal or organizational goals in that she/he first strives to serve others and see that their needs are being met.

Greenleaf (1977) identified several fundamental qualities of servant leaders including: initiative, understanding, listening, imagination, empathy, intuition, foresight, perception and awareness, the ability to persuade, conceptual ability, healing and serving, and the ability to build community. More recent studies have built on Greenleaf's listing by focusing on various combinations of attributes (Kiechel, 1992; Pollard, 1996; Farling et. al., 1999; Laub, 1999; Russell, 2001; McGee-Cooper, 1998). The most widely accepted compendium of Greenleaf's servant leader qualities (or characteristics) was compiled by Spears (1998), and confirmed by Contee-Borders's (2002) case study. Servant leaders have the qualities of:

- *listening* – they clarify the will of a group by listening receptively to what is being said;
- *empathy* – they strive to understand and empathize with others;
- *healing* – they have the potential for healing self and others;
- *awareness* – they exhibit general awareness, and especially self-awareness;
- *persuasion* – they rely on persuasion, rather than positional authority, in making decisions within an organization;
- *conceptualization* – they seek to nurture their abilities to dream great dreams;
- *foresight* – they have the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation in the future;
- *stewardship* – their first and foremost commitment is to serve the needs of others;
- *commitment to the growth of people* – they are deeply committed to the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of each individual within the institution; and
- *building community* – they seek to identify means of building community among those who work within a given institution (Laub, 2003).

Greenleaf (1977) also proposed that the concept of serving humbly illustrates a leader's responsibility to his followers. It is through the act of serving that leaders lead and people are guided to become "what they are capable of becoming" (Greenleaf 1977). Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) illuminate the philosophical basis of "service first" in terms of the "who" and "what" of servant leadership. Unlike larger-than-life leaders issuing orders from ivory towers, servant leaders serve, and the paradigm shifts from "I lead" to "I serve".

In a model where one serves rather than leads, the leader-employee relationship is one of "client-server, not supervisor-subordinate or master-slave" (Russell & Stone, 2002). DePree (1989) also argues that the core of servant leadership is serving rather than leading. It is through service, DePree notes, that leaders and followers become what they are capable of becoming. Russell and Stone (2002) summarize the findings of a host of experts (Greenleaf, 1977; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Manz, 1998; Oster, 1991; Pollard, 1996; Rinehart, 1998; Senge, 1990) who further argue that the prime motivation of leadership should be a desire to serve.

We suggest that the servant leader qualities described in the descriptive research on servant leadership will enhance the "commitment to serve" which is an important component of servant leadership orientation. The commitment to serve impacts the leader's relationships with those who report to her/him and have measurable impact on such organizational outcomes as trust and job satisfaction. The list above defines servant leadership as relational, nurturing, other-centered, self-aware, empathetic, and committed to the growth of individuals in community. As described, commitment to serve may be a way to enhance the affective component that impacts job satisfaction. Servant leadership qualities may be seen to contribute to job satisfaction as a

“process factor” (Staples & Higgins, 1998), or as important factors in creating an ethical climate and strengthening supervisory trust (Mulki, 2006). And its emphasis on valuing persons and placing the needs of others above self-interest is easily seen as vital to “other-oriented values” (Arciniega & Gonzalez, 2005).

Leader Member Exchange (LMX) and Leader Role Inversion

In a retrospective summary of 25 years of leader-member exchange theory, Graen & Novak (1982) observed that an important factor in setting role expectations is the set of exchange relationships between the new subordinate and the immediate supervisor (leader). The leader often has the authority to impose formal sanctions and to administer organizational incentives. Research on role-making processes in leader-member dyads has evolved primarily in the direction of the leader-member exchange (LMX) paradigm. Schriesheim, Castro, and Cogliser (1999) argued that new theoretical directions for LMX research are needed.

Sherman (2002) took up the challenge and focused on leader role inversion and its effect on subordinates. His research explores the impact of role inversion on job-related attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. The construct of role inversion can be linked to the concept of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), and Sherman employs it as a corollary to LMX theory to address the lack of empirical analysis in servant leadership studies and the problem of lack of substantive theoretical development.

Leader role inversion is a comparatively uncommon, distinct style of leadership in which the leader essentially inverts the status hierarchy within the work unit. The leader (manager) assumes the role of subordinate, with each subordinate assuming the role of leader in a particular area of specialization. This has important consequences for the LMX relationship. The leader essentially partners with the subordinate, deferring to his/her expertise to lead in solving problems in relevant areas. One result is status enhancement for the subordinate, and it is hypothesized that this is a factor in increased job satisfaction. Their responsibility is increased and accountability shifts to a greater degree from the manager (leader) to the focal subordinate. It is suggested that this may result in profound effects on work-related behavioral and attitudinal outcomes. An important factor is that the subordinate realizes that the leader has the formal authority to command compliance by use of legitimate and coercive power, but seeks appropriate opportunities to partner with the subordinate and chooses to serve as a strategy of leadership. This can have profound effect on the leader-subordinate relationship (Graen & Cashman, 1975).

Role inversion has similarities to related constructs such as empowerment, mentoring, or self-leadership. For example, with self-leadership (Manz, 1986; Manz & Sims, 1987), self-criticism, self-goalsetting, self-evaluation, self-expectation, and task rehearsal are encouraged by the leader. This is a distinct style of leadership that can be described as leadership behavior that results in a reversal of roles in which the leader assumes the role of subordinate and the subordinate assumes the role of leader in his or her area of specialization. Manz and Sims (1987) have defined self-leadership as leading subordinates to lead themselves. Senge (1990) has also contributed to this concept in his discussion of the role of leaders as stewards in the development of the learning organization. Hence, role inversion should be understood as simply a means to achieving self-leadership, just as it should be understood as a means to achieving a high-quality LMX. The focus is on the dyadic relationship with each subordinate, and the leader develops unique exchange relationships with each subordinate (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Schriesheim et al., 1999).

This unique relationship between leader and subordinate is a characteristic and definitive component of servant leadership orientation. Through the means of role inversion, the leader shows respect for subordinates, values them, offers personal development opportunities, builds community, and ultimately shares leadership with the follower. When supervisors practice role inversion, they narrow the gap between what the employee desires and values and what they are experiencing. The consistency of the behaviors with the commitment to serve increases the level of trust between supervisor and employee. The impact of being treated as valued partner must surely have a positive effect on the employee's level of satisfaction with his/her job.

Strength of Servant Leadership Orientation

Thus far, we have posited that qualities of servant leadership may improve the affective relationships between supervisor and worker by contributing to the leaders commitment to serve. In addition, we have described how behaviors associated with role inversion from the LMX literature may also impact the relationship between supervisor and worker. Given that both the attitude of "commitment to serve" and the role inversion behaviors can be tied to the concept of servant leadership we posit the following:

P1: The strength of the Servant Leadership Orientation will be a function of the interaction of commitment to serve and the extent to which Role Inversion Behaviors are practiced.

In the model below, we indicate that there is an interaction effect between these two elements that will have an impact on the strength of the servant leader orientation. Figure 1 shows the impact of the interaction and suggests the following propositions:

P2: Servant leadership orientation will be the strongest when commitment to serve is high and the use of role inversion behaviors is also high.

When the attitude of commitment to serve is consistent with role inversion behaviors in the workplace, this suggests that the servant leadership orientation is the strongest. In this case the attitudes and qualities associated with the servant leader construct are present and these attitudes and qualities are supported by role inversion behaviors that create consistency between attitude and action.

P3: Servant leadership orientation will be weakest when commitment to serve is low and the use of role inversion behaviors is low.

When a supervisor has few of the qualities associated with servant leadership then the commitment to serve is subsequently low. In addition, in this case, the supervisor does not engage in role inversion behaviors. This case would describe a more typical orientation toward supervisor as the authoritative leader who guides the employees. The servant leadership orientation, then, would be very low.

P4: Servant leadership orientation will be moderate when commitment to serve is low and the use of role inversion behaviors is high and when commitment to serve is high, but use of role inversion behaviors is low.

This proposition suggests that there is a midrange of servant leader orientation. In these 2 situations, a supervisor may have a commitment to serve and exhibit some of the personal attributes of servant leadership, but is unable to translate them into role inversion behaviors within the workplace. While this may benefit the employees in their affective relationship with the supervisor, the fact that the supervisor cannot or will not “walk the talk” will be frustrating. When the situation is the inverse, and the use of role inversion behaviors is present but the commitment to serve is lacking there is also inconsistency between attitude and action.

Figure 1

		Commitment to Serve	
		LOW	HIGH
Role Inversion Behaviors	HIGH	Strength of Servant Leadership Orientation is MODERATE	Strength of Servant Leadership Orientation is HIGH
	LOW	Strength of Servant Leadership Orientation is LOW	Strength of Servant Leadership Orientation is MODERATE

Strength of Servant Leadership Orientation and Job Satisfaction

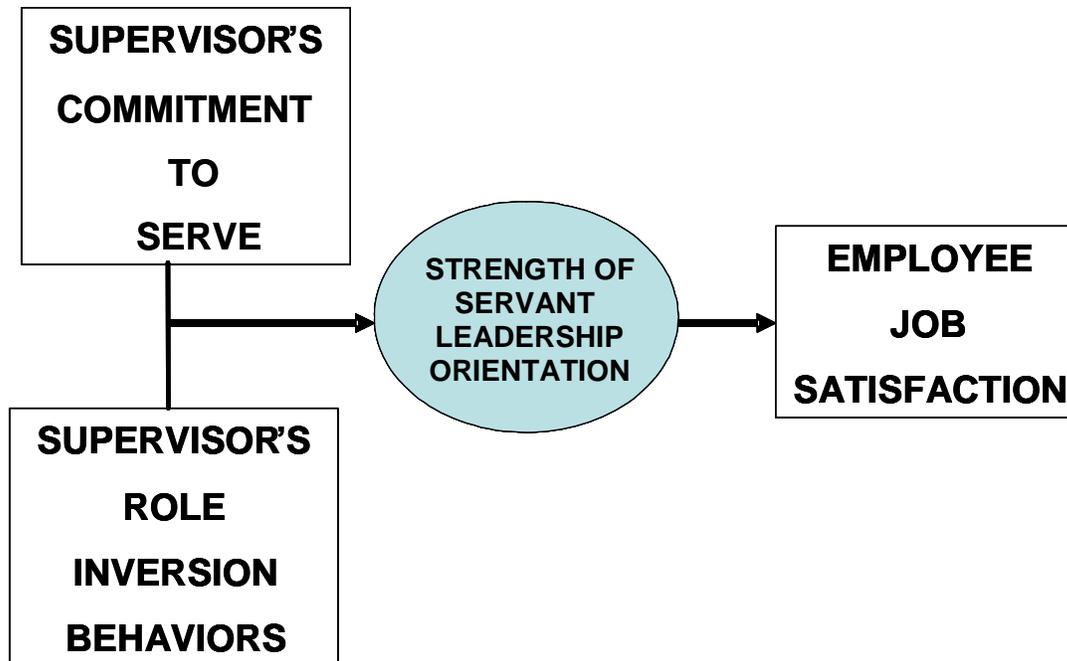
Research on job satisfaction has already determined that qualities related to servant leadership have a positive impact on job satisfaction. Research has also shown that role inversion behaviors have a positive impact on job satisfaction. These research findings suggest that these may be two elements, one representing attitude and the other representing behavior, that both impact the affective nature of the relationship between supervisor and worker. We argue that the concept of servant leadership, that has been so difficult to specify, has elements of both attitude and behavior. When the individual qualities of the supervisor and the behaviors demonstrated by the supervisor are combined, this combination will indicate the extent to which the supervisor adopts a servant leader orientation. This leads to the following proposition:

P5: There will be a positive relationship between the strength of the supervisor's servant leader orientation and the employee's reported level of job satisfaction.

This proposition is shown in the graphic model shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Model of Servant Leadership Orientation and Job Satisfaction



When servant leadership orientation is strong, the consistency between words and action increases the level of trust between supervisor and employee. The affective and cognitive elements of the relationship between the two are consistent. When servant leadership orientation is strong, the employee will feel valued and respected. This consistency between attitude and action will provide high levels of trust and reduce the gap between what the employee expects from the supervisor and what they experience on the job. Research on job satisfaction would suggest that this will increase employee job satisfaction and increase the probability that the employee will be retained. When servant leadership orientation is weak, there is consistency in words and action, but the consistent message is that the leader is “in control” and is superior to the employee. The consequent lack of empowerment and limited sense of value that is being communicated by the supervisor may have a negative impact on employee job satisfaction and may reduce the probability that the employee will be retained.

Conclusion

Higher worker job satisfaction is an important contributor to organizational effectiveness. High job satisfaction has a positive effect on such outcomes as lower absenteeism, higher worker retention (low job turnover) with its resultant cost savings related to training, and overall quality. The goal of this paper is to link the attitude of service and the practice of role inversion behaviors so that a clearer understanding of the servant leadership construct is possible. Servant leadership is a construct that generates both interest and skepticism. Servant leadership generates interest because of its potential to unleash tremendous productivity within an employee work group. It

generates skepticism because the mechanics of the construct are poorly understood. We see this construct as a potentially powerful tool to enhance employee satisfaction and improve organizational effectiveness. The more that is known about this approach, the greater the possibility that it will emerge from the fringes of leadership research and become a prototype of successful leadership behavior in the horizontal, knowledge-based, and power-sharing organizations of the 21st century.

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