



Does servant leadership foster creativity and innovation? A multi-level mediation study of identification and prototypicality



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this multi-level study is to examine how servant leadership affects both employee creativity and team innovation. Drawing from social identity, in particular, relational identification theory, we found on the basis of a two-nation Asian sample of 154 teams that servant leadership promotes individual relational identification and collective prototypicality with the leader which, in turn, fosters employee creativity and team innovation. In addition, our study suggests that the mediated effect of leader identification is strongest when team climate for innovation is high.

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1. Introduction

Competitive advantage is often derived from individuals germinating novel and useful ideas and groups working together to implement these ideas (Hoegl & Parboteeah, 2007; Janssen, van de Vliert, & West, 2004; Liao, Liu, & Loi, 2010). Yet despite their inherent interdependence (cf. Pirola-Merlo & Mann, 2004), creativity and innovation have been studied independently with little or no integration. This is quite a significant omission as both individual creative endeavors and team innovative returns are needed for organizations to thrive. Despite the integral role of leaders stimulating employee creativity (e.g. Neubert, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008; Shin & Zhou, 2003; Wang & Cheng, 2010) and team innovation (Eisenbeiss & Boerner, 2010; Eisenbeiss, van Knippenberg, & Boerner, 2008), to our knowledge no research has examined leadership behaviors that influence these two outcomes at different levels simultaneously. The purpose of this research is thus to develop and test a multi-level framework assessing leader behaviors, the mediating psychological processes, and contextual influences that simultaneously foster both employee creativity and team innovation.

Previous studies have examined the role of high quality dyad leader-member relationships (Liao et al., 2010) and transformational leadership (Shin & Zhou, 2003) on employee creativity. To the best of our knowledge, Neubert et al.'s (2008) study is the first which examines the role of servant leadership on employee creativity. Servant leadership is a holistic approach to leadership that encompasses the rational, relational,

emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions of leader–follower relationships such that followers enhance and grow their capabilities, as well as develop a greater sense of their own worth as a result. Even though servant leadership as a construct shares some similarities with transformational leadership, it is qualitatively and empirically distinct. A transformational leader will excite and inspire followers to perform beyond expectations, but these behaviors are typically motivated by a preoccupation with the organizational goals rather than followers' development. On the contrary, servant leaders are genuinely focused on promoting others' interest over and above those of the leader or leader-defined organizational interests, thereby promoting a sense of psychological safety, trust and fairness in the work context (Hu & Liden, 2011; Kark & Carmeli, 2009; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011; Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011). Such sense in turn would trigger employee creativity (cf. Kark & Carmeli, 2009).

Servant leaders display a sustained and altruistic commitment to help followers to grow (Giampetro-Meyer, Brown, Browne, & Kubasek, 1998) and act as a "primus inter pares" (first among equals). As they place the good of those led over self-interest, their power becomes a means to serve others. Therefore both serving and leading become almost exchangeable (van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leadership entails subordination of their own goals for the greater good of the team and organization. As such, servant leaders embody many of the characteristics of the team and its most desirable elements, hence are perceived as prototypically representing the key and most desirable elements of the team. Servant leadership directly influences affect-based trust rather than cognitive-based trust through its focus on nurturing team members' well-being and cultivating a sense of community within the team.

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Drawing from the relational identification concept, we propose that the orientation of servant leaders towards service and follower development promotes a feeling of security and safety as well as perspective that their leaders are associated with 'normative behavioral expectation' (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Such feeling and perspective encourage the extent to which followers define themselves in terms of their relationship with the leader, or, in other words, leader identification (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007), which in turn, increases followers' intrinsic motivation to succeed in their efforts and goals. The same rationale holds in that servant leaders will be seen as prototypical leaders who exemplify team values for the sake of the team members rather than their own goals. These prototypical leaders will also be likely to foster collective effort in implementing creative ideas. Corroborating team climate research, we further propose that the creative and innovative outcomes from these psychological processes are also influenced by a team climate that encourages innovation.

This research extends the field in at least three ways. First, this study is one of the few which examines mediating social psychological processes to illustrate the mechanisms by which leadership, in particular servant leadership, influences both individual creativity and team innovation. In doing so, our study answers calls to examine the influence of leaders at multiple levels (cf. DeChurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty, & Salas, 2010; Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010) to determine whether leader behavior influences not only individual relationships but also the collective (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Thus our research provides a significant integrative contribution, showing that the strength of individuals and team relations contributes to creativity and innovation. It provides empirical evidence in support of theory development on relational identification with the leader (Aryee et al., 2007), self-definition approaches (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), and internally sustaining motivational processes (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Further, our examination of climate adds to the converging recognition across both the creativity (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004) and leadership literatures (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009) about the importance of context and its role in realizing the full potential of leaders. Finally, and of significant relevance for practice, we extend the study of follower-oriented leadership behaviors (Walumbwa, Wang, Wang, Schaubroeck, & Avolio, 2010) by highlighting the vital role of leaders with a genuine interest in follower development in fostering individual creativity and team innovation.

2. Theory and hypotheses

Following previous studies, we define employee creativity as the development of practical and new solutions to workplace challenges (Amabile, 1988, 1996), whereas team innovation refers to the implementation of novel and useful ideas in a team setting (Pirolo-Merlo & Mann, 2004). Thus employee creativity is a prerequisite for team

innovation (Yuan & Woodman, 2010). Note that the relationship among the studied variables is depicted in Fig. 1.

2.1. Servant leadership, leader identification and employee creativity

Organizational scholars suggest that leader–follower relationship is critical to how followers define themselves at work (Aryee et al., 2007) providing them with a sense of connection (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008), self-expansion (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), and self-consistency (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Therefore the primary interest of our study is 'relational identification' rather than 'classical identification' (cf. Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), that we deliberately focus on the extent to which followers partially define themselves by internalizing their individual identities in reference to the leader–follower relationship they find themselves in. A positive leader–follower relationship serves the followers' task-related need (e.g., developing clear mutual expectations of cooperative behaviors) and social-psychological needs (e.g., sense of belonging, meaning, identity) (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Hence, the focus of the followers is on the leader–follower relationship and how that relationship extends followers' definition of self and the suppression of the followers' individuality in favor of the salient leader.

The literature suggests that servant leaders' behaviors (e.g., provide guidance to develop followers), intentions (e.g., willingness to sacrifice for others), and values (e.g., employing ethically justifiable means) generate followers' respect and loyalty (Liden et al., 2008; Neubert et al., 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011; Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Oke, 2010). Such positive evaluation towards servant leaders' behaviors stimulates a process by which followers' beliefs, feelings and behaviors are influenced by and gel with those of the leader (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003; Shamir et al., 1993; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). The role of servant leadership in the above relationship is unique from other relationship-based leadership approaches such as leader–member exchange. The central tenet of leader–member exchange is the perceived quality of the leader–follower relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), whereas servant leadership focuses more on the perceived quality of followers' development in multiple dimensions of self (e.g., emotional, spiritual). The attention, support, and care given by the leader encourage followers to view themselves according to the tight-knit relationship they have with their leader.

While we acknowledge the fact that servant leaders' goals may not always be focused on creativity (e.g., productivity, quality, or safety), particularly when that goal is not opportune for followers' interest, the strong association of followers' identity with the leader–follower relationship creates a powerful and personal motivation for followers to embark in creative endeavors. This process can be explained with relational identification theory (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory of emotion and Edmondson's (1999) theory of psychological safety.

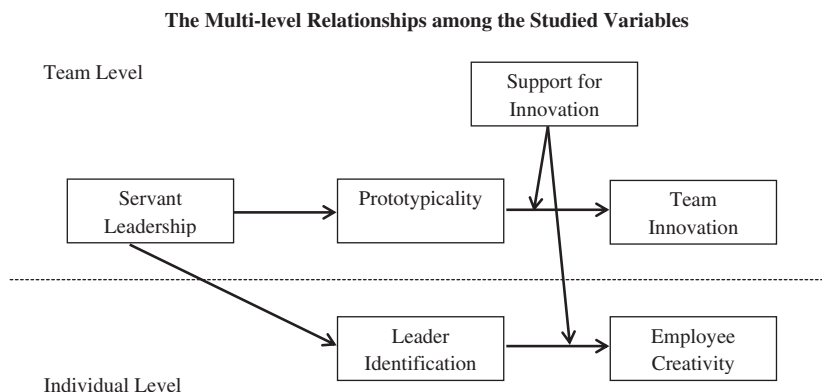


Fig. 1. The multi-level relationships among the studied variables.

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