The servant leadership advantage: When perceiving low differentiation in leader-member relationship quality influences team cohesion, team task performance and service OCB

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Servant leadership
Perceived leader-member LMX differentiation
Team cohesion
Team task performance
Service organizational citizenship behaviors

ABSTRACT

How does servant leaders' unique ability to place each follower's needs above their own influence relationships between followers and impact their collective performance? In a study that integrates principles of servant leadership with the social comparison theoretical framework, we tested a group-level model to examine how servant leadership induces low perceived differentiation in leader-member relationship quality (perceived LMX differentiation) within a group, which strengthens team cohesion and in turn positively influences team task performance and service-oriented organizational citizenship behaviors (service OCB). Our sample comprised 229 employees nested in 67 work teams. Structural equation modeling results indicate that servant leadership significantly predicts low perceived LMX differentiation; perceived LMX differentiation is strongly related to team cohesion such that the lower the perceived differentiation, the stronger the team's cohesiveness. And, team cohesion is also strongly related to both the team's task performance and service OCB. Perceived LMX differentiation and team cohesion mediate the effect of servant leadership on both team task performance and service OCB.

Introduction

In recent decades, organizations worldwide have restructured work around teams to enable more rapid, flexible and adaptive responses to turbulent and complex work environments (Kozlowski & Bell, 2013; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). As a result, leaders must mobilize not only individuals, but each team as an entity. Leadership is a complex influential process that plays a central role in enabling the integration of individual contributions into a cooperative group effort (Hogg, 2006; Northouse, 2007). Among the numerous leadership styles, Servant leadership has drawn more recently significant attention among both academics (e.g., Graham, 1991; Liden, Panaccio, Meuser, Hu, & Wayne, 2014; van Dierendonck, 2011) and practitioners (Spears, 1995) in response to a growing interest in a more ethical, pro-social, and people-centered management leadership style. Servant leadership is characterized by a focus on followers' growth and empowerment, and on leaders' altruism, empathy, sense of ethics and community stewardship (Greenleaf, 1977, 1998; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008). Compared with related leadership styles whose primary focus is the well-being of the organization, servant leadership is unique in that the leader is viewed as a 'servant' attending to followers' needs above his or her own (van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leadership's central premise is that servant leaders influence organizational

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.05.002
Received 28 January 2016; Received in revised form 4 April 2017; Accepted 16 May 2017
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Please cite this article as: Chiniara, M., The Leadership Quarterly (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.05.002
outcomes by fostering followers' growth and well-being, specifically through the process of satisfying followers' needs (Liden et al., 2008; Mayer, 2010). Servant leadership research is still in its early stages, and although empirical results show evidence of servant leadership's influence on individual performance (e.g., Chiniara & Bentein, 2015; Liden et al., 2008), research has only begun to establish a relationship between servant leadership and team performance (e.g., Ehrhart, 2004; Hu & Liden, 2011; Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014). For servant leadership to gain further legitimacy as a mainstream leadership theory, research must advance the identification of processes explaining how a leadership style with such an explicit focus on the individual can help achieve team objectives (Mayer, 2010). While mechanisms such as team potency (Hu & Liden, 2011), service culture (Liden, Wayne et al., 2014), procedural justice (Ehrhart, 2004) or trust in leaders (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011) have been found to play a role in explaining the influence of servant leadership on team performance, the effect of servant leadership on relational dynamics between team members within this context needs to be understood. The objective of this study is to take on this challenge.

To address this theoretical gap in the servant leadership literature, we first draw on Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory that stipulates that human beings possess the innate need to evaluate themselves by comparing their skills, opinions, or possessions with relevant others, which ultimately influences their attitudes and behaviors. In organizational settings, this social comparison process is viewed as inevitable in work groups. Given the considerable importance of the relationship between leaders and followers (Ferris et al., 2009), employees naturally tend to observe social comparisons to evaluate how strongly they are valued and respected by their leader, they would not perceive a difference to the purpose of the team (Festinger, 1950; Carron, 1982). Team cohesion has been studied extensively in several contexts including LMX differentiation, and to examine LMX differentiation's effect on teams' relational dynamics.

In the present study, building upon social comparison theory, we propose that servant leadership impacts team performance by influencing perceptions of low LMX differentiation among team members, which in turn strengthens team cohesion. Specifically, our model rests on the premise that servant leaders are characterized by their strong capability to build quality relationships and support the growth of all followers, which converges on followers how strongly they are valued and respected (Greenleaf, 1998). Given that teammates naturally observe and rely on social comparisons with work peers to evaluate themselves (Festinger, 1954), because all followers feel appreciated and respected by their leader, they would not perceive a difference of quality in the leader-follower relationships between themselves, even though they might observe differences in the nature and content of leader-member relationships because of differences in individual characteristics and needs. Hence, these comparisons would engender lower levels of perceived LMX differentiation (Mayer, Erdogan, & Piccolo, 2008); therefore we first postulate that servant leadership produces lower perceived LMX differentiation. A reduced level of differentiation between team members diminishes the tendency of teammates to socially categorize themselves into subgroups and on the contrary, enhances the strength of shared attraction toward the team. It also reinforces the ties among team members, thus positively influencing team cohesion. Therefore, our model further proposes that low perceived LMX differentiation drives team cohesion upwards (Festinger, 1954). When team members feel cohesive, they work together not only toward achievement of team task objectives (i.e., team task performance) but also toward increased support for other teams (i.e., service OCB). Notably, we chose other teams to be recipients of OCBs, hereafter named service OCBs, to reflect the context of a serving-other culture that servant leadership establishes by promoting and engaging the collective to help others (Liden et al., 2008). Hence, we finally postulate in our model that team cohesion predicts team performance as conceptualized by both team task performance and service OCB. Fig. 1 depicts our hypothesized model.

This research makes several significant contributions to the servant leadership and LMX differentiation literatures. First, the present study serves to substantiate servant leadership's theoretical premise that servant leaders' distinctive focus on serving followers' individual needs can improve team-level performance. Indeed, by drawing on social comparison theory, we are able to extend the servant leadership domain by explicitly demonstrating the specific team relational processes through which servant leadership increases not only team task performance, but also service OCB. Specifically, by investigating servant leadership's influence on LMX differentiation and team cohesion we shed new light on the range of influence the servant leader possesses to enhance collective
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