



SERVANT LEADERSHIP'S ROLE IN ENABLING SUSTAINABILITY IN ORGANIZATIONS: AN OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

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Abstract:

Following the pandemic, organizations need to focus on strengthening their sustainability. As a measure of modern business success, organizational sustainability is affected by diverse factors. Nevertheless, the authors have only recently begun to examine the nexus between servant leadership and organizational sustainability. Servant leaders possess the know-how needed to successfully manage the complexities of organizational sustainability. In particular, environmentally specific servant leaders encourage pro-green outcomes in their organizations. This paper provides an overview of seven empirical studies which evaluate the effect of servant leadership and environmentally specific servant leadership on sustainability in organizations.

Keywords:

servant leadership, environmentally specific servant leadership, organizational sustainability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Organizational sustainability entails meeting environmental, economic, and social demands without endangering future generations. It positively affects innovation in organizations, enhances management of risk and secures competitive advantage. After the pandemic, organizations need to reclaim their sustainability by demonstrating persistence, flexibility, and the capacity to rethink their routes to success. Organizational sustainability is affected by diverse factors such as organizational learning capacity, talent management, green intellectual capital, sustainable behavior, environmental human capital practices, green and employee performance (Batool, Mohammad, & Awang, 2022). Nevertheless, the authors have only recently begun to examine the association between servant leadership and organizational sustainability. Servant leaders enable their followers to actualize their full potential and motivate them to become servant leaders themselves. These leaders' actions are guided by their ethical values and they positively affect employees, organizations and communities. Therefore, servant leadership seem to be an appropriate approach to achieving organizational sustainability, which is regarded as an indicator of modern organizational success. Indeed, servant leaders possess the values, skills and willingness to successfully manage the complexities of organizational sustainability (Alafeshat & Tanova, 2019; Batool et al., 2022; Ying, Faraz, Ahmed, & Raza, 2020). Particularly, environmentally specific servant leaders can effectively model behavior of their subordinates and encourage their pro-green behavior in organizations (Gu & Liu, 2022; Hou, Gai, & An, 2023; Peng et al., 2022; Zafar, Tian, Ho, & Zhang, 2022).

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This paper provides an overview of seven empirical studies which evaluate the effect of servant leadership and environmentally specific servant leadership on various outcomes in the field of organizational sustainability.

2. SERVANT LEADERSHIP THEORY

Servant leadership, on the surface level, appears somewhat paradoxical, as someone who is expected to lead others is also called upon to serve them. Even though this approach challenges our conventional assumptions about leadership, it also provides a unique viewpoint. This conceptualization was proposed by Greenleaf (1977), following his extensive experience in the corporate sector and desire to improve leadership processes. The essence of this approach is that servant leaders prioritize their followers over their own interests, empower them and enable to actualize their full potential by providing opportunities for material and emotional advancements (Northouse, 2021). Following, this approach is rooted in ethics since servant leaders place great emphasis on the betterment of the workplace, community and society in general.

Liden, Panaccio, and Meuser (2014) provided a model of servant leadership with antecedents, leader behaviors and outcomes. Antecedents include context and culture, leader attributes and follower receptivity. Dimensions of culture can significantly affect the manner in which servant leadership is achieved. For instance, this leadership approach may be more prevalent in low-power distance cultures (e.g. Nordic Europe), where power is evenly distributed across various layers of society. Leader attributes have a great impact on how individuals display their servant leadership since people vary according to their self-efficacy, moral development and emotional intelligence. Follower receptivity represents the extent to which a subordinate desires to be served by their leader. Servant leadership is effective when there is an alignment between a leader's propensity to serve and a follower's receptivity to being served. Indeed, Meuser, Liden, Wayne, and Henderson (2011) found that this alignment has a positive effect on subordinate output and organizational citizenship behavior and the reverse was found in the absence of this alignment.

The authors of the model propose a number of servant leader behaviors (Liden et al., 2014). Conceptualizing implies the leader understands the organization's direction, mission and intricacies. Emotional healing occurs when leaders recognize others' challenges and offer their help to overcome them. Putting followers first suggests prioritizing subordinate's interests and accomplishments above their own. Enabling followers' growth and success is achieved when leaders support follower career growth, provide mentorship and support.

Behaving ethically entails that leaders will never sacrifice their ethical principles for the sake of success. Empowering implies that leaders enable their subordinates to be independent, make decisions and be autonomous. Generating value for the community is achieved when leaders purposefully give back to the community by participating in local activities, and by motivating their employees to volunteer (Northouse, 2021).

The servant leadership outputs include subordinate performance and progress, organizational performance and impact on society. The outcomes regarding subordinates entail the realization of their full potential, effective job accomplishment and the desire to become servant leaders themselves. Servant leaders' impact on organizational performance encompasses positive effects on employees' organizational citizenship behaviors, and improved team effectiveness and potency (Hu & Liden, 2011). The outputs regarding societal impact include good treatment of employees, which results in their satisfaction and positive treatment of customers and creating jobs in the communities the organization operates (Northouse, 2021).

Robertson and Barling (2017) expanded the theory of servant leadership to the environmental sphere. Environmentally specific servant leadership (ESSL) is demonstrated when leaders guide, empower and groom individuals to become pro-environmental citizens. Leaders display authenticity, interpersonal cooperation, humbleness and support to individuals' pro-environmental efforts (Tuan, 2021). Environmentally specific servant leaders represent role models with environmental concerns who serve and enable their followers to achieve sustainable objectives of their organization and society (Faraz, Ahmed, Ying, & Mehmood, 2021). Both servant leadership and environmentally specific servant leadership have recently generated significant interest among scholars regarding their impact on individual and organizational outcomes. The following section provides an outline of the studies that documented their positive impact on sustainability in organizations.

3. THE EFFECT OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP ON ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY: STUDIES OVERVIEW

This section provides an overview of three articles in which servant leadership was examined as a key contributor to organizational sustainability and four articles which evaluate the impact of environmentally specific servant leadership on environmental outcomes. To begin with, Batool et al. (2022) investigated the impact of servant leadership on organizational sustainability. Organizational sustainability is a way of being and working that respects the ecological, societal and economic demands



without compromising the prosperity of the upcoming generations (Ong, Soh, Teh, & Ng, 2015). It favorably affects outcomes and innovation at work, improves risk management and gains competitive advantage by engaging stakeholders (Whelan & Fink, 2016). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations have been trying to reclaim their sustainability by demonstrating endurance, adaptability, and willingness to explore new routes to success. In their study, Batool et al. (2022) applied quantitative methodology and collected 441 questionnaire responses from employees in the hotel industry in Malaysia. Their findings reveal that the proposed association is indirect and that operates through the mediating roles of creativity and psychological resilience. Creativity entails developing unique and relevant concepts for organizational sustainability (Amabile, 1997), whereas psychological resilience refers to the ability to demonstrate positive adjustment following stressful incidents on the job, with the aim of being more sustainable (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). The novelty of this study entails combining the elements of human capital and examining their impact on organizational sustainability.

Employees' Voluntary Green Behavior (EVGB) plays a vital role in achieving the targets of ecological sustainability within an organization (Ying et al., 2020). Importantly, leaders can stimulate this behavior among their subordinates. Therefore, Ying et al. (2020) examined the effect that servant leadership may have on EVGB via the mediating roles of psychological empowerment and autonomous motivation for the environment (AME). Psychological empowerment enables workers to feel competent and in charge while doing their job. This self-assurance regarding the empowerment is crucial for engaging in EVGB. The mediating role of psychological empowerment is examined since it is the essence of servant leadership. Furthermore, Autonomous Motivation for the Environment (AME) entails that one engages in behaviors that stem from one's inner goals and self-awareness (Hagger et al., 2014). Since AME fundamentally links servant leadership and EVGB, it is examined as the mediator of this relationship. The results based on dyadic data provided by 315 supervisor-subordinate pairs in the electric industry in Pakistan showed that the impact of servant leadership on EVGB is simply and serially mediated by psychological empowerment and AME. This research advances our understanding of how servant leaders may endorse environmental benefits in organizations among staff members.

Alafeshat and Tanova (2019) examined the ways in which servant leadership and high-performance work systems (HPWS) facilitate organizational performance, conceptualized in the form of employee satisfaction and employee retention. HPWS is defined as a blend of human resources practices that enhance worker skills, attitudes and productivity so that they contribute to the sustainable

competitive advantage (Datta, Guthrie, & Wright, 2005; Saks, 2006). Longitudinal data was collected from 300 subordinates within a private airline company in Jordan on three occasions separated by a one-week time lag. The results showed that servant leadership and HPWS routines enhanced employee retention and satisfaction, which are perceived as facets of organizational sustainability. The authors further investigated the way in which this effect unfolded and found the mediating role of employee engagement in this process. Employee engagement is viewed as a favorable employee attitude at work that instils loyalty to the organization and thus results in enhanced organizational performance and goal accomplishment (Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004). It was found that servant leadership and HPWS positively affect the results since they enhance employee engagement. Indeed, increased employee engagement leads to increased employee retention and satisfaction. Therefore, the sustainability of the aviation sector in Jordan vastly depends on enhancing employee engagement and understanding the importance of servant leadership (Alafeshat & Tanova, 2019).

Since Environmentally Specific Servant Leadership (ESSL) can contribute to the green behaviors of subordinates, Gu and Liu (2022) studied the ways in which green role modelling and employees' perception of CSR facilitate the link between ESSL and employees' voluntary green behavior (EWGB). A role model represents a perceptible construct that an individual creates on the basis of a person's characteristics demonstrated in social settings that the individual views as comparable to themselves and aspires to increase this comparability by mirroring those characteristics (Gibson, 2004). Therefore, environmentally specific servant leaders who respect and implement green policies and ecological principles are likely to represent green role models to their followers. CSR is defined as activities and procedures of organizations that consider stakeholders' prospects, as well as economic, social and environmental outcomes (Aguinis, 2011). As such, it fundamentally contributes to organizational sustainability (Porter, Kramer, Lenssen, & Smith, 2019). In particular, perceived CSR positively affects a number of individual-level outcomes such as worker creativity and performance, job satisfaction, identification, organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior (Gu & Liu, 2022). There are two types of EWGB behavior: in-role green behaviors, which the organization demands and rewards for a particular task (Ramus & Killmer, 2007), and extra-role green behaviors, which are employees' voluntary behaviors that the organization neither expects nor rewards (Paillé & Boiral, 2013). Gu and Liu (2022) collected survey data on two occasions from 512 employees within eight organizations in China. The results showed that ESSL is positively associated with both in-role green behavior and



extra-role green behavior of subordinates. Furthermore, it was shown that green role modeling mediates the link between ESSL and EWGB. Additionally, employees' perceived CSR was shown to moderate the mediating path from ESSL to EWGB via green role modeling (Hou et al., 2023). Gu and Liu (2022) suggest that organizations should encourage environmentally specific servant leadership and develop their own CSR policies and practices with the aim of encouraging in-role and extra-role green behaviors of subordinates, which subsequently enhance sustainability, ecological preservation and societal progress.

Considering the issues induced by unwarranted carbon dioxide discharges, companies are now faced with higher expectations for green progress and are looking for ways to enhance their green performance. Therefore, Hou et al. (2023) investigated the effect that environmentally specific servant leadership may have on organizational green performance and examined the mediating role of green creativity, as well as the moderating influence of power distance orientation in this relationship. Organizational green performance entails the efficiency of the software and hardware used in an organization's procedures regarding green goods or practices, such as energy saving, green product scheme, inhibition of contamination, recycling efforts or technological innovation. As such, green performance indicates an organization's growth potential. On the other hand, green creativity involves generating novel and applicable ideas or solutions regarding green products, services or processes. Being the foundation for general green innovation, green creativity is a stepping stone for the expansion of green products. Power distance orientation represents the extent to which people accept the unequal distribution of power within organizations. For instance, workers who score high on a power distance index are more cognizant of rank discrepancies during exchanges and thus tend to comply with decisions made by the supervisors. In contrast, those with low scores on power distance index tend to focus more on egalitarianism and are more critical of their leaders (Luo, Wang, & Tong, 2020). In their study, Hou et al. (2023) used a questionnaire to collect 576 responses from leaders and their subordinates in China. The results showed that ESSL positively affects green performance. Furthermore, green creativity mediates this relationship and power distance orientation moderates this association in a way that greater power distance orientation has yielded more significant link between ESSL and green creativity (Hou et al., 2023). This study enhances our understanding of ESSL and offers a new outlook on how to improve green performance in organizations.

Many organizations dissipate vast quantities of electrical power due to inefficient power consumption behavior. Therefore, Peng et al. (2022) investigated whether

environmentally specific servant leadership (ESSL) may enhance the energy-specific pro-environmental behavior (EPEB) of staff members within hospitals. The authors examined the mediating role of green self-efficacy (GSE) and green perceived organizational support (GPOS). Self-efficacy entails one's conviction that they are capable of effectively executing a particular undertaking (Bandura, 1977). Regarding the environmental perspective, GSE represents one's conviction that they can finalize various tasks in an environmentally friendly manner. Employees whose supervisor is concerned with ecological issues share the feeling that the organization creates a reassuring atmosphere in which their environmental outputs can be assessed favorably (Hongxin et al., 2022). Observing that an organization supports environmental programs will significantly encourage employees to behave in an ecologically aware fashion (Karatepe, Hsieh, & Aboramadan, 2022). Peng et al. (2022) collected data from 316 hospital employees in Pakistan via a survey. The results showed that a servant leader with green inclinations could significantly stimulate workers' EPEB, while GSE and GPOS mediated this link. The outcomes of this study could be beneficial to the medical field which could more efficiently decarbonize its processes by enhancing the power saving behavior of workers via ESSL, GSE and GPOS (Peng et al., 2022).

Since environmental processes and development of CSR depend on leaders, Zafar et al. (2022) studied the impact that environmentally specific servant leadership may have on triggering voluntary pro-environmental behavior of employees. Voluntary pro-environmental behavior (VPEB) represents the deliberate engagement of employees in the activities that concern protecting the natural surroundings above their job requirements (Lamm, Tosti-Kharas, & Williams, 2013). These behaviors contribute to the ecological performance of organizations, as well as to the general performance of organizations and their workers. Indeed, voluntary green behavior is consistent with beliefs, objectives and values of ecological and social responsibility. Environment leaders tend to inspire subordinates' identification with the organization, which contributes to their feelings of belongingness, partnership and identity (Al-Ghazali, Gelaidan, Shah, & Amjad, 2022). This identity enables employees to decidedly participate in VPEB in order to benefit their organization (Teng, Lu, Huang, & Fang, 2020). Data were collected from 434 employees within the textile industry in Pakistan via a questionnaire. The results showed that environmentally specific servant leadership affects VPEB in a serial mediation model involving psychological empowerment and organizational identity. This psychological process in organizations provides insights as to how organizations may obtain a superior level of sustainability and may enhance their ecological undertakings.



4. CONCLUSION

This paper provides an overview of seven empirical studies which examine the impact of servant leadership on various outcomes regarding organizational sustainability. In particular, servant leadership was found to positively influence employee creativity, psychological resilience, psychological empowerment, autonomous motivation for the environment (AME), employees' voluntary green behavior (EVGB), employee engagement, employee retention and satisfaction. Moreover, environmentally specific servant leadership (ESSL) was found to enhance green role modeling, employees' voluntary green behavior (EVGB), green creativity, organizational green performance, energy-specific pro-environmental behavior (EPEB), green self-efficacy (GSE), green perceived organizational support (GPOS), voluntary pro-environmental behavior (VPEB), psychological empowerment and organizational identity. Therefore, both servant leadership and environmentally specific servant leadership represent powerful tools for achieving organizational sustainability.

5. LITERATURE

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