

# *The Impact of Servant Leadership on Employee Innovation—A Trust-Based Perspective or the Impact of Servant Leadership on Employee Innovation*

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to explore the impact of servant leadership on employee innovation, particularly through in-depth analyses based on the perspective of trust. Through an empirical research methodology, we found that servant-leaders significantly contribute to employees' innovative behaviours by enhancing their trusting relationship with employees. By focusing on employees and providing support and care, servant leaders not only create a work environment conducive to innovation, but also stimulate employees' innovative awareness and motivation through the establishment of trust mechanisms. The findings suggest that trust plays an important mediating role between servant leadership and employee innovation, providing new perspectives and insights into organisational management practices.

## 1. Introduction

In a fast-changing business environment, the ability of employees to innovate has become the key to sustained competitive advantage for organisations. In order to foster this innovation capability, the role of the leader cannot be ignored. Servant leadership, as an employee-centred leadership style that focuses on the growth and well-being of employees, has received a lot of attention in the management field in recent years. This study aims to delve into the impact of servant leadership on employee innovation, and to analyse the important role of trust in this relationship, particularly from the perspective of trust. With the advent of the knowledge-based economy, the ability of employees to innovate is crucial to the long-term development of organisations. However, innovation is not an easy task; it requires employees to have the spirit of daring to try and explore, and the cultivation of this spirit is closely related to the behaviour of leaders. By providing support, care and guidance, servant leaders help to create a work environment that encourages innovation and tolerates failure, which may stimulate the innovative potential of employees. Trust also plays an increasingly important role in organisations. Organisations with high levels of trust tend to be better able to facilitate knowledge sharing, collaboration and communication, which are important foundations for innovation.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations of Servant Leadership and Employee Innovation

As a unique leadership style, the core concept of servant leadership is to serve employees as the first priority, and to enhance the overall effectiveness of the organisation by increasing employees' growth, autonomy and job satisfaction. This style of leadership focuses not only on the material needs of employees, but also on their spiritual fulfilment, and is committed to creating a work environment full of trust, respect and support. The definition of servant leadership is not set in stone, but it is generally accepted that it is orientated towards serving employees and stimulating their potential and creativity by listening, understanding and supporting their needs. This type of leadership emphasises that the role of the leader is not to simply give orders, but to build a relationship of mutual trust with employees and work together towards the organisation's goals. In exploring the core characteristics of servant leadership, we can easily find several significant features: firstly, servant leaders focus on listening, they believe that the opinions and suggestions of employees are crucial to the development of the organisation, so they will actively seek and respect the views of the employees; secondly, servant leaders emphasise teamwork, they believe that the collective power is far better than the individual, and therefore are committed to building a harmonious and collaborative team atmosphere; Finally, servant leaders are concerned about the personal growth of their employees. They not only provide the necessary resources and support for their employees, but also customise their development paths according to their strengths and interests. Compared with other leadership styles, such as transformational leadership and transactional leadership, servant leaders are more effective in focusing on the needs of employees, building trusting relationships, and motivating employees. Transformational leaders emphasise vision and motivation, but from an organisational perspective, whereas servant leaders focus more on the individual feelings and needs of their employees. Transactional leaders, on the other hand, focus more on managing employees through rewards and punishments, in contrast to the people-centred philosophy of servant leaders. In exploring the theory of employee innovation, we first need to clarify the definition of innovation and its importance. Employee innovation is not only about coming up with new ideas or solutions, but also about putting these ideas into practice to bring about substantial change and improvement to the organisation. Employee innovation is crucial to the long-term development of organisations, and it can help organisations to adapt to the ever-changing market environment and enhance their competitiveness. There are many factors that influence employee innovation, including organisational culture, leadership style, work environment and employees' own attributes. In terms of organisational culture, an open and tolerant culture encourages employees to try and innovate; in terms of leadership style, as mentioned above, servant leaders can help to stimulate employees' sense of innovation and motivation by providing support, care and guidance; in terms of the work environment, a comfortable, flexible and well-resourced work environment can provide employees with more opportunities to innovate; and in terms of the employees' own characteristics, such as curiosity, adventurousness, and the ability to take risks, they are more likely to innovate than others. In terms of work environment, a comfortable, flexible and well-resourced work environment can provide employees with more opportunities to innovate; and employees' own attributes, such as curiosity, risk-taking and critical thinking, are important drivers of innovation<sup>[1]</sup>. A preliminary exploration of the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovation reveals a strong link between the two. Servant-leaders help to stimulate employee innovation and creativity by creating a supportive and open work environment, as well as providing the necessary resources and guidance. At the same time, servant leaders also focus on building a relationship of mutual trust with their employees, which not only enhances their job satisfaction and sense of belonging, but also reduces their psychological pressure and perception of risk in the innovation process. Therefore, it can be inferred

that servant leadership has a positive effect on employee innovation.

### **3. The Role of Trust Between Servant Leadership and Employee Innovation**

Trust, a core concept deeply rooted in human social interaction, also plays a significant role in organisational management. When we explore the role of trust in organisational behaviour, it is not difficult to find that it is important for promoting teamwork, enhancing employee satisfaction and driving innovation. In particular, trust plays an indispensable role between servant leadership and employee innovation.

Trust can be understood as an individual's strong belief in the reliability, integrity and competence of another person or organisation. In the field of organisational management, such beliefs can profoundly influence individuals' attitudes, behaviours and decision-making processes, thus shaping distinctive patterns of behaviour and cultural climate within the organisation. The presence of trust acts as an invisible bond that binds team members together to work together towards the organisation's goals.

The role of trust in organisational behaviour is multifaceted. First, from the perspective of economic efficiency, trust can significantly reduce transaction costs and improve the efficiency of cooperation. In a team full of trust, members are more willing to share information and collaborate to solve problems rather than working separately and being suspicious of each other. This atmosphere not only reduces the cost of searching for and verifying information, but also makes teamwork smoother and more efficient. Second, trust is also critical to increasing employee satisfaction and loyalty. Working in an atmosphere of trust, employees feel more support and respect, which leads to a stronger sense of belonging to the organisation. They are more willing to work hard for the success of the organisation and remain steadfast even in the face of difficulties. Finally, trust is also a powerful driver of organisational innovation and learning. A trusting environment encourages employees to come up with new ideas and try new approaches without fear of being blamed or ridiculed for failure. This atmosphere of freedom helps to stimulate creative thinking among employees, driving continuous improvement and innovation in the organisation.

There is a strong link between servant leadership and trust building. Servant leaders build a deep foundation of trust with their employees through consistent communication, understanding and support of their needs. They earn the heartfelt trust of their employees by listening to them and caring about their growth and well-being. This style of leadership not only focuses on task completion and performance achievement, but also values interaction and communication with employees, and is committed to building and maintaining good interpersonal relationships. The behaviours of servant leaders have a profound impact on trust, and their transparency, fairness and consistency are all key factors in building trust. Under the leadership of servant leaders, employees are able to feel fairness and respect, which leads to greater trust and support for the leader's decisions and actions.

The embodiment of trust is ubiquitous in servant leadership practices. Leaders project an image of trustworthiness through consistency in word and deed, fair and unbiased behaviour, and genuine care for employees. They actively participate in team activities, share experiences and knowledge, and maintain close contact and communication with employees. This interaction not only strengthens the emotional connection between leaders and employees, but also further solidifies the relationship of trust. Under the influence of servant leaders, an atmosphere of trust pervades the entire organisation, providing a solid foundation for teamwork and innovation.

The mechanism of trust's influence on employee innovation is multidimensional. In a trusting environment, employees are more willing to try new methods and ideas because they believe that the leader and the team will give support and encouragement. This sense of psychological security

is one of the important factors that stimulate employees' innovative spirit. At the same time, trust promotes the formation of a culture of knowledge sharing and co-operation. When employees establish a deep trust relationship with each other, they are more willing to share their knowledge and experience and jointly contribute to the team's innovation. In addition, trust also enhances employees' autonomy and responsibility. Working in an atmosphere of trust, employees feel more autonomy and decision-making power, so they are more actively involved in innovation activities and contribute to the progress of the organisation.

Trust and the creation of an innovative atmosphere go hand in hand. An organisational culture that encourages innovation and tolerates failure can greatly stimulate employees' sense of innovation. The formation of such a culture cannot be separated from the support of trust, because trust allows employees to dare to challenge the status quo, the pursuit of excellence, and thus promote the innovative development of the organisation. Under the leadership of servant leaders, organisations can inspire their employees' sense of innovation and team spirit by creating an atmosphere of trust, thus injecting a constant flow of power for the organisation's continuous progress.

#### **4. The Direct Impact of Servant Leadership on Employee Innovative Behaviour**

The various behavioural practices of servant leadership, as a form of leadership that focuses on the growth and well-being of employees, have a profound impact on employee innovative behaviour. Among them, empowering behaviours, creating a supportive atmosphere, vision sharing, caring behaviours, and role modeling are all important ways in which servant-leaders stimulate employee innovation. In terms of empowering behaviours, servant-leaders greatly stimulate employees' innovative awareness and initiative by giving them more autonomy and decision-making power. In the traditional leadership model, employees tend to be only passive in carrying out tasks, whereas under the management of servant leaders, employees are encouraged to participate in decision-making and take more responsibility for work processes and results. This empowerment not only enhances employees' sense of self-worth, but also gives them more room to try out new ideas and approaches. When employees feel that their work is not just about performing tasks, but part of being able to take the initiative to create and make a difference, their sense of innovation and work ethic is greatly enhanced. Creating a supportive, inclusive work environment is another hallmark of servant leadership. In such an environment, employees feel that their ideas and attempts are accepted and encouraged, and they are willing to take the risk of trying new methods and ideas without fear of being blamed for failure. This atmosphere not only reduces resistance to innovation, but also gives employees a greater sense of security and self-confidence in the innovation process. Servant-leaders further promote employees' innovative behaviours by providing the necessary resources and support, as well as timely and constructive feedback. Vision sharing is critical to guiding employees in a clear direction of innovation. By sharing the organisation's vision and goals with employees, servant leaders help them understand how their work fits into the organisation's overall strategy. This shared vision not only provides employees with a clear framework for their goals, but also inspires a sense of purpose and belonging. When employees know exactly how their work and innovations contribute to the long-term development of the organisation, their innovative behaviours are more relevant and effective. The caring behaviours of servant leaders also have a positive impact on employees' innovative behaviours. Through personalised care and support, servant leaders enhance employees' job satisfaction and sense of belonging. When employees feel valued and cared for, they are more likely to translate this into intrinsic motivation to innovate. Caring behaviours also include a focus on employees' personal growth and development, a focus that allows employees to feel that their work is not just a means of earning a living, but an important

avenue for self-actualisation and growth<sup>[2]</sup>. Finally, servant leaders set an example for their employees through their own innovative behaviours and achievements. A leader's words and actions have a profound effect on employees. A leader who is innovative and courageous will inspire employees to imitate and innovate. Employees will be more convinced of the value and significance of innovation when they see the leader's success through innovation, so that they will be more actively involved in the practice of innovation. Servant leaders directly influence employees' innovative behaviours through a variety of ways such as empowering behaviours, creating a supportive atmosphere, vision sharing, caring behaviours, and role modeling. These behaviours not only enhance employees' innovative awareness and initiative, but also provide them with an environment and conditions conducive to innovation. Therefore, servant leadership has significant advantages and roles in stimulating employee innovation. In order to further enhance employees' innovation, organisations should actively cultivate and promote the concept and practice of servant leadership so that more leaders can master and apply these effective methods to stimulate employees' innovation potential. At the same time, employees should also actively participate in the innovation process, and work with leaders to promote organisational innovation and development.

## 5. Conclusion

The impact of servant leadership on employees' innovative behaviour is all-encompassing and far-reaching. Through the act of empowerment, servant-leaders give employees greater autonomy and decision-making power, which effectively stimulates their sense of innovation and initiative. At the same time, the supportive work environment created by leaders provides security for employees to try out new methods and ideas, which further promotes the emergence of innovative behaviours. By sharing organisational vision and goals, servant leaders help employees clarify the direction of innovation, making innovative activities more targeted and effective. In addition, the caring behaviours of leaders enhance employees' job satisfaction and sense of belonging, providing intrinsic motivation for innovation. Servant leaders set an example for their employees through their own innovative behaviours and achievements, which stimulates their desire for innovation. Taken together, by using these strategies in an integrated way, servant leaders not only enhance employees' awareness and ability to innovate, but also create a positive and dynamic innovation atmosphere for the organisation, which has a positive impact on the organisation's long-term development.

## References

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