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## Research Article

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# The Relationship between Servant Leadership and Work Engagement: An Organizational Justice as a Mediator

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## Abstract

This study aimed to verify the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement, and the role of organizational justice as a mediator of that relationship. The research design was a cross-sectional design. The sample was 813 teachers of high schools and vocational high schools in East Java and Central Java, Indonesia. This study used the structural equation modeling for data analysis. This study found that servant leadership was positively related to organizational justice while servant leadership was not significantly related to work engagement. Organizational justice was positively related to work engagement. Organizational justice fully mediated the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement.

**Keywords:** servant leadership, organizational justice, work engagement, high school and vocational high school, teacher

## 1. Introduction

The increasing volatility and complexity of tasks in the organization has stimulated employees to engage in an organization. As a result, employees make adaptation for changing working conditions in an organization (Luthans, 2002). When organizations are required to make changes, work engagement of employees becomes an important element in the change process (Saks, 2006). Studies on work engagement of employees have received a significant attention, because it is relevant to organizational activities as well as organizational performance (de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014). For example, previous studies showed that work engagement was positively related to organizational commitment (Hakanen et al., 2006), job satisfaction (Lu et al., 2016), and job performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010).

Servant leadership is contemporary leadership, in which it is in line with leadership practice.

Servant leadership has the following characteristics, such as focusing on leadership from the perspective of the behavior leader, emphasizing attention to follower issues, empathy and developing followers (Northouse, 2013). Servant leadership is considered to be an important factor because of its ability to boost organizational performance in various sectors, including educational organizations (i.e., schools). Servant leadership is a determinant of an organization's ability in service (Riquelme et al., 2019).

Previous studies also showed that specific leadership behaviors influenced work engagement; they were transformational leadership (Zhu et al., 2009), servant leadership (de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014; Kaya & Karatepe, 2020), authentic leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Alok & Israel, 2012), charismatic leadership (Babcock-Roberson & Strickland, 2010) and empowering leadership (Tuckey et al., 2012). As a leader, the school principal is a person that influences the attitudes and behavior of teachers. Therefore, it is necessary for the management of schools to encourage teachers to be more engaged in their schools in order to increase the level of teachers' productivity as well as school effectiveness. Besides the servant leadership, increasing work engagement will be accomplished by implementation of organizational justice in the workplace. Hence, this study focuses on verifying the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement, and the role of organizational justice as a mediator of that relationship.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Servant Leadership, Work Engagement, and Organizational Justice

Servant leadership emphasizes the role of a leader as a steward or a servant (Eva et al., 2019). Servant leadership is a leadership style that focuses on developing the potential of employees to achieve the effectiveness of their respective duties, developing service communities, increasing self-motivation, and developing future leadership abilities (Liden et al., 2008). Servant leadership includes various dimensions such as relational, ethical, emotional, spiritual (Eva et al., 2019). Various empirical studies prove that servant leadership is an effective organizational leadership concept that can be applied in various fields including tourism (Ling et al., 2016), education (Cerit, 2009), non-profit sector (Parris & Peachey, 2013), public sector (Schwarz et al., 2016), and youth sector (Eva & Sendjaya, 2013).

Employees who engage are employees who are willing to fully invest in their role, are proactive and committed to meeting high performance standards (Bakker & Leiter, 2010). People who engage have characteristics such as involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, work persistence, and full of energy (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Work engagement is conceptualized as a state of mind that is positive, satisfying and related to work engagement that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Organizational justice is the way an individual perceives justice in the decision-making process and the distribution of results that individuals receive (Greenberg & Baron, 2003). Organizational justice has four types, namely, distributive justice, procedural justice, interpersonal justice, and informational justice (Colquitt et al., 2001). Organizational justice is an important motivator in a work environment. When individuals feel an injustice, employee morale will decrease, and it is likely that employees will leave their jobs (Cropanzano et al., 2007).

Distributive justice is a cognitive evaluation that individuals do to assess whether they are able to provide a fair amount and allocation of rewards or not (Luthans, 2002). Procedural justice relates to fair procedures when someone makes decisions related to employees, such as salary increases, promotions, job changes, and feedback (Luthans, 2002). Interpersonal justice relates to the way people perceive the reality based on the quality of interpersonal treatment that employees receive (Bies, 2005). Interpersonal justice is the level where someone is treated with courtesy, respect, and dignity (Colquitt et al., 2001). Informational justice focuses on the explanations that individuals provide to explain why certain procedures are used, how procedures are carried out in certain ways or why the results are distributed in certain ways (Colquitt et al., 2001).



## 2.2 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Servant leadership is associated with high employee trust, perceptions of fairness, and employee loyalty (van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leaders tend to be role models to influence subordinates (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Therefore, one of the results of servant leadership implementation is organizational justice (Zehir et al., 2013; Ateş, 2015; Riza et al., 2019). A meta-analytic study of Armagan and Erzen (2015) shows that servant leadership has a positive and medium-magnitude effect on organizational justice. Organizations with the servant leaders will positively increase organizational justice (Chung et al., 2010; Walumbwa et al., 2010).

H1: Servant leadership is positively related to organizational justice.

Servant leaders, through their capacity, seek to empathize followers in identifying certain qualities and unique attributes (van Dierendonck, 2011), to support employees and meet the needs of employees in the workplace through coaching (Bass, 2000), and to create opportunities in the workplace that allow employees to take their responsibility (Walumbwa et al., 2010). Therefore, servant leaders can increase positive energy among employees (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). When job expectations and goals are clear, employees become more engaged in their work (Coetzer et al., 2017), and when employees feel that the work at hand can generate opportunities for personal growth, in turn, employees will spend more energy levels in their daily work (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009a, 2009b).

Referring to previous studies (e.g., de Clercq et al., 2014; Saremi, 2015; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017; Kaya & Karatepe, 2020; Hidayat et al., 2020), servant leadership has a significant positive effect on work engagement. Servant leadership is a style to stimulate positive relationships between leaders and followers (Liden et al., 2014). Servant leaders should be focus on their followers rather than on themselves (Eva et al., 2019). When servant leaders have prioritized their followers' welfare and growth, in turn they become more involved and effective in their respective work (Eva et al., 2019). Servant leaders should be humble, in which "humble leaders showed the highest impact on follower engagement regardless of their hierarchical position" (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017, p. 13).

H2: Servant leadership is positively related to work engagement.

Organizational justice is the overall perception of fairness in the workplace (Robbin & Judge, 2013). When employees feel fairness within the organization, employees feel obliged to improve engagement behavior (e.g., Srimulyani, 2016; Özer et al., 2017; Hadiyani et al., 2018; Septiani & Arwiyah, 2018). Employees can judge how fairly they are treated by the organization through procedural fairness, for example when the organization involves employees in the decision-making process regarding organizational procedures; even when the results are unfavorable to employees (Bies & Shapiro, 1988). A procedurally fair of work environment increases organizational identification, in turn it increases work engagement (Adamovic et al., 2020).

H3: Organizational justice is positively related to work engagement.

Bao et al. (2018) found that servant leadership is positively related to the work engagement of followers and this relationship was mediated by the Leader Member Exchange (LMX). Meanwhile, Park et al. (2016) have revealed that self leadership and organizational justice directly significantly affects work engagement, and indirectly self leadership affects work engagement through organizational justice as a mediator. Servant leadership is important for facilitating organizational justice among employees, in turn organizational justice will increase work engagement.

H4: Organizational justice mediates the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement.

Based on literature review and hypothesis formulation, the following research model can be seen in Figure 1.

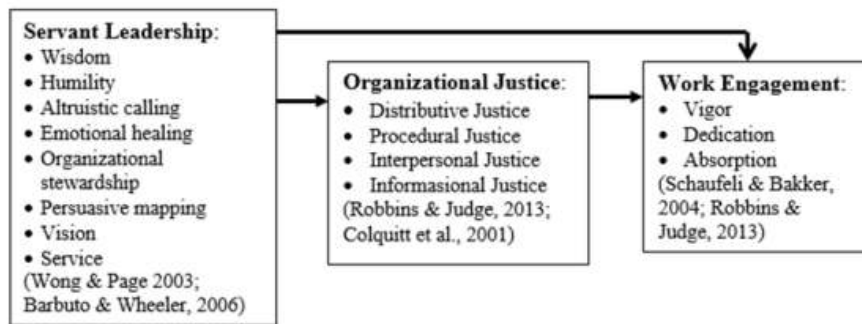


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

### 3. Research Method

#### 3.1 Sample and procedure

We used a cross-sectional design (Creswell, 2014). The sample was 813 teachers of high schools and vocational high schools in East Java (i.e., Surabaya, Blitar, Kediri, Nganjuk, Kertosono, Madiun, Ponorogo, Magetan, and Ngawi) and Central Java (i.e., Cepu, Blora, and Rembang), Indonesia. The teachers were selected randomly and spread over 56 high schools and vocational high schools consisting of 25 public schools and 31 private schools. Of the 825 teachers invited to participate, 813 teachers completed the questionnaires, then the response rate was 98.55%.

#### 3.2 Measures

Referring to Matsunaga (2008), we used item parceling for measuring servant leadership, organizational justice, and work engagement. Measurement of servant leadership used five dimensions of Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), namely wisdom, altruistic calling, emotional healing, organizational stewardship, and persuasive mapping, and three dimensions from Wong and Page (2003), namely service, humility, and vision. Organizational justice is operationally defined as the overall perception of what is fair in the workplace as measured by four dimensions, namely distributive justice, procedural justice, interpersonal justice and informational justice (Robbins & Judge, 2013; Colquitt et al., 2001). Work engagement operationally defined as the condition of employees who are full of passion at work, as measured by three dimensions, namely vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Robbins & Judge, 2013).

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows that the mean value of organizational stewardship dimension is highest (4.2814), while emotional healing dimension is lowest (3.8352). The mean value of interpersonal justice dimension is highest (3.9068), while the lowest is informational justice dimension (3.5784). Dedication dimension is highest mean value (3.9587), while the lowest is absorption dimension (3.3538).

#### 4.2 Testing the Structural Equation Model

Structural equation modeling was adopted for the data analysis. The structural equation model achieved the good fit (chi-square = 2773, df = 397; normed fit index [NFI] = 0.96; comparative fit



index [CFI] = 0.96; incremental fit index [IFI] = 0.96; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.075).

Table 1 also shows factor loading, average variance extracted, and composite reliability. Factor loadings are higher than 0.5, thus they are valid (Hair et. al., 2010) and also indicate convergent validity (Murwani et al., 2017). Average variance extracted ranges from 0.879 to 0.929 and shows greater than the accepted value of 0.50, thus also indicates convergent validity (Hair et. al., 2010; Murwani et al., 2017). Composite reliability ranges from 0.90 to 0.96 and shows greater than the accepted value of 0.70, thus provides internal consistency of construct (Hair et. al., 2010; Murwani et al., 2017).

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics, Factor Loading, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Composite Reliability (CR) of Constructs

Construct	Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
Servant Leadership (SL)	Wisdom (WS)	4.2558	0.61014	0.57	0.96	0.929
	Humility (HUM)	4.0027	0.57964	0.56		
	Altruistic calling (AC)	3.8440	0.66457	0.65		
	Emotional healing (EMO)	3.8352	0.69915	0.67		
	Organizational stewardship (OS)	4.2814	0.54971	0.52		
	Persuasive mapping (PM)	4.0472	0.56728	0.55		
	Vision (VS)	4.0903	0.55386	0.54		
	Service (SRV)	4.0507	0.63408	0.62		
Organizational Justice (OJ)	Distributive Justice (DJ)	3.7214	0.76244	0.68	0.90	0.879
	Procedural Justice (PJ)	3.9338	0.56379	0.53		
	Interpersonal Justice (INJ)	3.8895	0.99810	0.94		
	Informational Justice (IFJ)	3.5784	0.95572	0.92		
Work Engagement (WE)	Vigor (VG)	3.6607	0.81690	0.80	0.94	0.932
	Dedication (DD)	3.9587	0.82561	0.80		
	Absorption (ABS)	3.3538	0.82646	0.79		

Table 2 shows the results of testing the structural model. Servant leadership was positively related to organizational justice which supported H1. Next, servant leadership was not significantly related to work engagement. Thus, H2 was not supported. Further, organizational justice was positively related to work engagement which supported H3. Lastly, organizational justice was verified in mediating the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement. We found that organizational justice fully mediated the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement. Thus, H4 was supported. Referring to Baron and Kenny (1986), the full mediation occurred because independent variable (servant leadership) was not significantly related to dependent variable (work engagement), while independent variable was significantly related to mediator variable (organizational justice), and mediator variable was significantly related to dependent variable.

**Table 2:** The Results of Testing the Structural Model

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value (and z-value for Sobel test)	Result
H1	SL → OJ	0.18	0.036	5*	Supported
H2	SL → WE	-0.0053	0.010	-0.53	Not Supported
H3	OJ → WE	0.98	0.02	49*	Supported
H4	SL → OJ → WE	(0.18) (0.98) = 0.176**	0.0354**	4.97**	Supported

\*p < 0.01.

\*\*The computation was based on Sobel test which guided by Kristopher J. Preacher and Geoffrey J. Leonardelli (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2001).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Relationship between Servant Leadership and Organizational Justice

The result supports previous studies (e.g., Zehir et al., 2013; Ateş, 2015; Riza et al., 2019) that servant leadership has a positive and significant effect on organizational justice. The result means that there is a positive impact of servant leadership on perceptions of employees about distributive justice (i.e., justice related to distribution of resources) (e.g., Robbins & Judge, 2013). Distributive justice focuses on ways to provide rewards or compensation to employees, including wages or salaries received by employees or other bonuses whose amount of course adjusts the performance of the employee (Robbins & Judge, 2013).

The result also means that servant leadership influences positively and significantly on procedural justice. When employees believe that the procedures of resources distribution are fair, then they will feel satisfied (Ambrose, 2002). The organization is perceived as fair by employees if employees are given the opportunity to voice their opinions and the views until the implementation of resources distribution is considered the same for each employee (e.g., Ambrose, 2002; Robbins & Judge, 2013). Procedural justice focuses on how to make decisions from a problem that can have an impact on a sense of injustice in the minds of employees, especially if at the time of making decisions, employees do not have room for disagreement (Robbins & Judge, 2013).

Next, the result means that servant leadership leads to employee perceptions that employees are treated fairly. Servant leadership encourages the improvement of the quality of interpersonal behavior when carrying out procedures in the organization, which represents polite, dignified, and respectful behavior (e.g., Bies & Moag, 1986; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Nabatchi et al., 2007; Sabeen, 2012).

Finally, the result means that servant leadership affects informational justice. A leader is important for being authentic and interacting deeply with others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Servant leadership encourages informational justice in which adequate explanation and evidence about the decisions taken are available (Nabatchi et al., 2007).

### 5.2 Relationship between Servant Leadership and Work Engagement

Previous studies (e.g., de Clercq et al., 2014; Saremi, 2015; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017; Kaya & Karatepe, 2020; Hidayat et al., 2020) found that work engagement was influenced by servant leadership. However, we found that servant leadership is not significantly related to work engagement. This result is in line with the findings of Haar et al. (2017). This result may indicate inconsistency in implementation of servant leadership principles, in terms of humility, and focus on followers' welfare and growth. When servant leaders have not prioritized their followers' welfare and growth, in turn followers become less involved in their work (Eva et al., 2019). Next, when servant leaders are not humble, in turn followers pay more attention to hierarchical position of leaders than their work engagement (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017).

### 5.3 Relationship between Organizational Justice and Work Engagement

Organizational justice has a positive and significant effect on work engagement. The result supports the previous studies (Alvi & Abbasi, 2012; Storm et al., 2014; Lyu, 2016; Srimulyani, 2016; Özer et al., 2017; Hadiyani et al., 2018; Septiani & Arwiyah, 2018; Ivani et al., 2019; Ohioyenoye & Eguavoen, 2019; Deepa, 2020). The finding indicates that teachers are valuable to the organization, they are respected, and they are treated fairly, in turn work engagement of teachers increases. When the teachers are valued, in turn the teacher are proud of their profession as teachers. Teachers who are treated fairly will exchange the behavior expected by the school as an organization (Bies & Shapiro, 1988).

The finding also indicates that the certain procedures are followed and the resources are



distributed as such (Colquitt et al., 2001). The teachers have an adequate explanation of the resource distribution procedures with an emphasis on timeliness, specificity, and truth (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011). In other words, the finding indicates that the school principal explains the overall decision-making procedure with a reasonable explanation to the teachers, in turn they become more engaged in their work. This finding implies that it is important for school to use quality communication when explaining decisions to the teachers (Kernan & Hanges, 2002).

#### 5.4 Organizational Justice as a Mediator *the Relationship between Servant Leadership and Work Engagement*

The result shows that the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement was fully mediated by organizational justice. In line with Park et al. (2016) that organizational justice mediates the influence of self-leadership on work engagement. Servant leadership should let employees grow and feel comfortable in the organization (van Dierendonck, 2011). Therefore, high organizational justice leads a full mediating role in the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement. Likewise, indirect testing shows that servant leadership influences positively on organizational justice, in turn organizational justice also influences positively on work engagement.

## 6. Conclusion

Work engagement of teachers is an important factor in schools. The results of this study indicate that for improving work engagement, school principal should serve servant leadership properly (i.e., becoming a humble leader as well as focusing on teachers' welfare and growth) and build a climate of justice in school, which includes distributive justice, procedural justice, interpersonal justice, and informational justice.

The limitation of this study is that it only examines influence of servant leadership and organizational justice on work engagement in 56 schools, in turn further research can verify that influence in wider schools. It can also be expanded by examining the other variables (i.e., independent and/or mediator variables) as well as the consequences of work engagement.

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