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# **Servant Leadership and Project Success: Parallel Mediation by Work Engagement and Project Work Withdrawal**

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# **Servant Leadership and Project Success: Parallel Mediation by Work Engagement and Project Work Withdrawal**

**BAM Track 13: Leadership and Leadership Development**

## **Abstract**

Drawing on social exchange theory, this research investigated the processes underlying the relationship between servant leadership and project success. Specifically, we tested two distinct mediating mechanisms, work engagement and project work withdrawal, that have received limited attention in the project management literature. The proposed parallel mediation model was tested using survey data from 247 project management practitioners. The findings suggest that followers' work engagement and work withdrawal behaviours partially mediate the relationship between servant leadership and project success. Further, we found that project work withdrawal is a relatively more significant mediator in the servant leadership—project success relationship. The results shed light on the beneficial consequences of servant leadership on project success by engaging project team members and mitigating their work withdrawal behaviours, thus improving their productivity. Accordingly, we posit that servant leadership is an effective leadership style for addressing the inherent challenges faced by managers in most projects.

**Keywords:** Servant leadership; work engagement; project work withdrawal; project success; parallel mediation

**Word count:** 6,338

# 1. Introduction

Project management has become an important organizational activity over the past few decades. The GDP contributions from project-oriented industries globally are forecasted to reach \$20.2 trillion over the next 20 years (PMI, 2017). Until recently, project management was primarily concerned with managing projects as technical systems. However, with the increasing emphasis on human behavior in organizational success, project management literature is now inclined towards viewing them as behavioral systems (Belout & Gauvreau, 2004). Though the literature on measurement of project success is quite rich, there is relatively little research on the role of leadership and leadership styles (Turner & Müller, 2005). A review of the limited extant literature suggests that people-oriented leaders are more successful in achieving project success (Lee-Kelley & Kin Leong, 2003; Mäkilouko, 2004). According to Aga et al. (2016) there is a need to understand the underlying mechanisms through which leaders achieve project success. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the servant leadership—project success relationship with the mediational roles of work engagement and project work withdrawal. We investigate how servant leaders, who put aside their self-interest for the benefit of their followers (Liden et al., 2014; Liden et al., 2008), can encourage work engagement and reduce work withdrawal among their followers.

Servant leaders may help followers grow and succeed by putting followers' interest first and promoting increased collaboration among them (Hunter et al., 2013a; Liden et al., 2008). Followers of such leaders would be more engaged (De Clercq et al., 2014) and experience a positive emotional state towards their daily work (Page & Wong, 2000). In this inquiry, we introduce work engagement as a key mechanism through which servant leadership behavior would likely increase project success. We propose that engaged employees would be very enthusiastic about their work (May et al., 2004) and this engagement would likely increase individual and organizational performance (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Rurkkhum & Bartlett, 2012; Shuck et al., 2013; Shuck et al., 2011).

Servant leadership has been scarcely examined in the context of work withdrawal as antecedents of organizational outcomes (Ekrot et al., 2016). We found evidence of only one study conducted on US retail organizations (Hunter et al., 2013b). Prior research suggests that work withdrawal has detrimental effects on organization's performance (Kacmar et al., 2006). It is thus important to understand how project work withdrawal can be mitigated to enhance project performance and ultimately project success. We posit that servant leadership would foster positive energy among followers (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) and focus on stakeholder needs fulfilment (Lemoine et al., 2019), and therefore, would likely decrease followers' project work withdrawal. Thus, we contend that project work withdrawal is a significant predictor of project success.

In this study, we extend the work of Aga et al. (2016) and call attention to two intervening mechanisms through which servant leadership would likely increase project success. Our central research question is: how does servant leadership influence project success? We used social exchange theory (Blau, 1964a) as a theoretical lens to explain the underlying mechanisms through which servant leadership improves project success via work engagement and project work withdrawal. Reciprocity, or repaying obligations to another, is one of the best-known exchange rules in social exchange theory (Gouldner, 1960). Leaders build positive relationship with followers, who in return engage in positive behavior directed towards, leaders, colleagues, and customers (Lemoine et al., 2019). Similarly, servant leaders would trigger positive relationships with followers who reciprocate by engaging in positive behaviors like work engagement and avoid counterwork behavior. Furthermore, servant leaders would also create a 'serving culture' within

the project, which encourages their subordinates to prioritize the needs of their own subordinates and peers above their own (Liden et al., 2014). Therefore, the positive effects of servant leaders may spillover beyond their direct followers. Accordingly, we posit that servant leaders would improve followers' work engagement and reduce their work withdrawal behaviors, which would ultimately improve project performance.

In sum, the objective of this study is to examine the mediating role of work engagement and work withdrawal on servant leadership—project success relationship. This research contributes to the servant leadership literature in four ways. First, we posit that the employees would exhibit strong work engagement when their supervisors engage in servant leadership behaviors. Second, we argue that servant leadership would diminish the followers' project work withdrawal behaviors. Third, we examine parallel mediational taking work engagement and project work withdrawal as mediators for the servant leadership—project success relationship. Fourth, while servant leadership has been studied mainly in the context of developed Western countries, we examine its application in the cultural and institutional context of a developing Asian country.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership falls under the cadre moral approaches to leadership and has gained incremental scholarly attention over the past few years (Liden et al., 2015). The concept of servant leadership is multidimensional and has evolved from the emerging stream of leadership literature involving ethical and moral motives underlying leader behaviors and actions, including ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006), authentic leadership (Shamir & Eilam-Shamir, 2018), and spiritual leadership (Fry, 2005). Although there are overlapping similarities in these concepts, each of these have their specific motives, assumptions and underpinning theories. Lemoine, Hartnell and Leroy (2018) have conducted a review of literature on the three mainstream moral concepts of leadership, i.e. ethical, authentic and servant leadership, and have established conceptual boundaries and overlaps on the basis of their specific moral content specifically arguing that “ethical, authentic, and servant leadership are distinct in their emphases on compliance with normative standards, self-awareness and self-concordance, and stakeholders, respectively” (p.3). Accordingly, the theoretical frameworks underpinning servant, ethical, and authentic leadership are distinct from each other, such that servant leadership aligns with moral consequentialist theory on the basis of its focus on stakeholder need fulfilment, ethical leadership draws from the deontological approach, given that ethical leader is concerned about following ethical norms and rules, and authentic leadership is congruent with virtue ethics approach, and an authentic leader is focused on self-awareness and moral grit. Furthermore, in a recent meta-analysis comparing ethical, authentic and servant leadership and evaluating its incremental value beyond transformational leadership in explaining major organizational outcomes, it was found that ethical and authentic leadership could not explain any incremental utility, while servant leadership was the only style which demonstrated a distinctive and incremental value above and beyond transformational leadership in nine important organizational outcomes (Hoch et al., 2018)

Quite interestingly, the term servant leader was introduced by Greenleaf (1970) earlier than the other contemporary concepts such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1999) and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Gerstner & Day, 1997) were presented. However, the concept as such did not receive much recognition by leadership scholars until the start of the new millennium when it re-emerged in the work of Ehrhart (2004), being driven by an overall surge of attention on the

positivity literature (Bernstein, 2003). Initially servant leader was defined as: “the servant-leader is servant first... the difference manifests itself in the care taken... to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 27). Therefore, a servant leader is primarily focused on enabling others to grow rather than drive personal agendas. Not only is he or she concerned about the immediate stakeholders, he or she also strives to uplift the overall state of the society with philanthropic motives. This definition, although self-explanatory and cited several times in literature (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden et al., 2008), does not provide concrete theoretical grounds to operationalize it. Later, a number of authors have tried to operationalize it with varying precision (Ehrhart, 2004; Gregory et al., 2004; Hale & Fields, 2007; Parris & Peachey, 2013; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Spears, 2002), a review of which reveals a common moral content of serving the needs of multiple stakeholders including subordinates, customers, organization and the society at large and helping them to grow and develop into better entities (Hoch et al., 2018). Perhaps the most precise definition is that servant leaders “influence behaviors, manifested humbly and ethically within relationships, oriented towards follower development, empowerment, and continuous and meaningful improvement for all stakeholders” (Lemoine et al., 2018, p. 10). Being a multi-dimensional construct serving multiple stakeholders, servant leadership comprises multiple facets which include behaving ethically, emotional healing, helping subordinates grow and succeed, empowering others, having conceptual skills, putting subordinates first, and creating value for the community (Ehrhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2015).

## **2.2. Servant Leadership and Project Success**

Project success has been defined in several ways and different authors use varying criteria for defining project success and its critical success factors. This is an inherent challenge for measuring project success, since different stakeholders such as projects members, management, customers and shareholders view success of a project from different dimensions (Pinto & Slevin, 1988). In the early conceptualization of project success, it has usually been measured by the three core success factors of time, cost and scope/quality termed as the iron triangle (Atkinson, 1999; Belassi & Tukel, 1996; Jha & Iyer, 2007). These core criteria are based on the premise that projects are primarily technical systems, a philosophical standpoint which later gave way to view projects as behavioral systems (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Therefore, as the core criteria have been often employed to assess project success previously, more recent literature has emphasized the importance of factors beyond efficient project delivery that include broader management implications, such as client satisfaction and the ability of the project to meet strategic objectives (Ika, 2009), as well as a project’s long-term sustainability (Taherdoost & Keshavarzsaleh, 2016). Project success has also been measured on the four factors of customer satisfaction, budget and schedule, business success, and future potential (Shenhar et al., 1997). Freeman and Beale (1992) identified seven core criteria of project success namely technical performance, efficiency of execution, managerial and organizational implications (mostly customer satisfaction), personal growth, manufacturability, and business performance. Pinto and Mantel (1990) proposed three important success criteria i.e. client satisfaction, the implementation process, and perceived value of a project. According to Müller and Jugdev (2012), one of the most comprehensive and all-inclusive criteria for project success has been developed by Pinto and colleagues, who identified ten success factors for effective measurement of project success (Pinto & Slevin, 1988). Their list of criteria, termed the Project Implementation Profile (PIP), includes “project mission, top management support, project schedules/plan, client consultation, personnel, technical tasks, client

acceptance, monitoring and feedback, troubleshooting, and communication” (Pinto & Prescott, 1988, p. 7).

While the literature on measurement of project success is quite rich, there appears to be a comparatively limited emphasis on the role of leadership and leadership styles (Turner & Müller, 2005). However, a review of the limited extant literature uncovers that people-oriented leaders are more successful in achieving project success (Lee-Kelley & Kin Leong, 2003; Mäkilouko, 2004). Also, a few studies show that transformational leadership is significantly related to project success (Aga et al., 2016; Anantamula, 2010; Keegan & Den Hartog, 2004). Another study finds that a similar close correlate, empowering leadership, leads to enhanced project team performance through enhanced knowledge sharing (Lee et al., 2014).

Servant leaders have been established in recent literature as drivers of positive outcomes in terms of individual performance (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016; Liden et al., 2008), team performance (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018), as well as organizational performance (Liden et al., 2014). Most of the studies employ social exchange theory as the overarching framework linking servant leadership and its outcomes (Lemoine et al., 2018). These core argument is that servant leadership is a process of social exchange between leader and followers, whereby the servant leader creates positive outcomes for employees in both the work and life domains (Wang et al., 2017), to which followers reciprocate by exhibiting improved performance. Social exchange framework has also been applied to other leadership-follower outcomes, such as transformational and ethical leadership, but the exchange paths are different in each style (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018; Gregory et al., 2004; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Moreover, a number of studies show that servant leadership is a more effective style, e.g. in one study, it was observed that servant leadership is a more potent style to improve team performance than LMX, because servant leaders induce low perceived differentiation between members of a group, giving them an equal sense of inclusion, which serves to improve team cohesion and hence, enhances team performance (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018). Servant leadership was also found to explain greater variance in team performance than transformational leadership by creating affect-based trust in team members (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Since people-oriented leadership styles, particularly transformational leadership style, contribute to project success, and given that servant leadership style has performed equally, if not better, in other organizational contexts, we hypothesize that:

**H1: Servant leadership is positively related to project success.**

### **2.3. Servant Leadership, Work Withdrawal, and Project Success**

Work withdrawal behaviors are perhaps one of the most heavily investigated negative work behaviors (Wang & Walumbwa, 2007) and have been defined as a “set of behaviors dissatisfied individuals enact to avoid the work situation; they are those behaviors designed to avoid participation in dissatisfying work situations” (Hanisch & Hulin, 1990, p. 63). Work withdrawal can manifest both in the form of turnover intentions as well as a sense of disinterest or disengagement from the job, such as arriving late for work, thinking of excuses to avoid work, becoming irregular, and increased absenteeism (Walumbwa et al., 2004).

The literature is abundant with studies showing various leadership styles effecting employee turnover intentions as well as work withdrawal behaviors, e.g. it was found that leaders who build quality relationships with their subordinates could significantly reduce turnover intentions than those who maintained impersonal relationships (Ferris, 1985; Graen et al., 1982). Similarly, many studies show that transformational leadership has a negative effect on turnover intentions (Ding et al., 2017; Martin & Epitropaki, 2001; Wells & Welty Peachey, 2011) and work withdrawal

behaviors (Walumbwa & Lawler, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2004). Servant leadership, which is one of the more recently developed concepts of leadership, and has been shown to significantly affect work related behaviors (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Neubert et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2017), has been scarcely examined in the context of work withdrawal. For example, only one study was identified which found that servant leadership is negatively related with turnover intentions and disengagement (i.e. work withdrawal) in US retail organizations (Hunter et al., 2013b).

Most of the studies on work withdrawal behaviors and turnover intentions have examined them as outcome variables (Chi & Liang, 2013; Cropanzano et al., 1997; Liao et al., 2008; Scott & Barnes, 2011), while there is a lack of attention on observing their effect as antecedents of organizational outcomes (Ekrot et al., 2016). However, a few studies indicate that work withdrawal behaviors can be detrimental for the organization, e.g. turnover intentions have a negative effect on sales, profits, and efficiency of a work unit (Kacmar et al., 2006), in terms of individual as well as financial performance (Shaw et al., 2005) as well as firm performance (Glebbeek & Bax, 2004). It is also argued that turnover itself is not so harmful for the organization, rather poor performing employees who stay can be a more harmful element (Guthrie, 2001). Therefore, it can be predicted that work withdrawal behaviors which may include reduced effort and interest in the job, as well as turnover intentions as defined by Walumbwa et al. (2004), can produce detrimental outcomes. Particularly, to the best of our knowledge, the effect of withdrawal behaviors has not been tested as an antecedent of project success. Therefore, it can be inferred that there is a clear gap in literature vis-à-vis the effect of servant leadership on work withdrawal behaviors and also the effect of work withdrawal behaviors on project success. Therefore, we hypothesize;

**H2a: Servant leadership is negatively related to project work withdrawal.**

**H2b: Project work withdrawal is negatively related to project success.**

**H2c: Project work withdrawal mediates the relationship between servant leadership and project success.**

#### **2.4. Servant Leadership, Work Engagement, and Project Success**

Work engagement, which is defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74), has been established as a desired work attitude and shown to serve as a driver of positive work outcomes including productivity, task and contextual performance, customer loyalty, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Babcock-Roberson & Strickland, 2010; Bakker & Bal, 2010; Christian et al., 2011; Harter et al., 2002; Salanova et al., 2005). It has also been defined as “employees’ cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes” (Shuck & Wollard, 2010, p. 103). Work engagement is seen as a distinct and comprehensive organizational work attitude, as it takes into account the investment of an exhaustive list of resources: behavioral-physical, emotional, and cognitive resources (Harter & Schmidt, 2008). Both the definitions carry resonance with each other, as the behavioral-physical effort corresponds with vigor, emotional effort corresponds with dedication, and cognitive involvement aligns with the absorption state (De Clercq et al., 2014).

Servant leadership is characterized by a distinct set of positive behaviors and relationship dynamics that are directed towards the benefit, well-being, and development of followers, by explicitly putting their need first. This priority treatment leads to several positive work behaviors in followers, such as job satisfaction (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Neubert et al., 2016), commitment (Benevene et al., 2018; Rego et al., 2016), organizational citizenship behaviors (Mahembe &



Engelbrecht, 2014; Newman et al., 2017), knowledge sharing (Trong Tuan, 2017), and creativity and innovation (Yoshida et al., 2014). Based on the tenets of social exchange theory, servant leaders are more likely to elicit positive behaviors and outcomes from their subordinates, because they make a visible and concerted effort to serve the needs of their followers and invest in their development on a priority basis (Gregory et al., 2004)

An extant review of literature suggest that servant leadership also contributes towards work engagement (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; De Clercq et al., 2014; Ling et al., 2016; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Servant leaders' personal and deeper involvement in facilitating and enabling subordinates encourages them to be more motivated and actively involved in achieving organizational goals and objectives. An increased level of work engagement in team members is also likely to improve project success, a relationship which to the best of our knowledge has not been examined in the literature. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H3a: Servant leadership is positively related to work engagement**

**H3b: Work engagement is positively related to project success.**

**H3c: Work engagement mediates the relationship between servant leadership and project success.**

### **3. Methodology**

A research philosophy is a constellation of ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions (Saunders et al., 2016) that serves as the underlying framework for guiding the methodological choices employed in a study as well as the interpretation of its results (Biedenbach & Müller, 2011). The present research model was examined through the philosophical lens of post-positivism, which is often applied in quantitative research in the social sciences (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Unlike traditional positivist philosophy, post-positivism recognizes that we cannot attain absolute certainty when studying social phenomena (Creswell, 2014). However, it maintains that an objective reality does exist, and that causal relationships pertaining to human behavior can be established through reductionism and the application of the scientific method (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, post-positivism is a good fit with the objectives of the present study. A deductive approach was used to test the proposed relationships using survey data.

#### **3.1. Sample and Procedure**

Data were collected from a large vocational training organization in Pakistan, specifically from its north zone projects being conducted in the cities of Lahore, Jhang, Shorkot, Faisalabad, Sargodha, and Sialkot. Vocational training organizations employ several specialist staff that possess expertise in their area. To succeed in this context, it is important for leaders to recognize and facilitate the talents of their subordinates. Hence, such an environment is conducive to the application of servant leadership practices. The target respondents were employees that were engaged in various projects in these areas, mainly training and development, construction, and machinery installation projects. Since respondents were required to report on their last completed project, only those employees that had completed at least one project with the organization were selected for participation. The unit of analysis in this study is the individual project.

To mitigate common method bias, data collection was conducted in two waves (Podsakoff et al., 2012) separated by three weeks' time. Respondents' names were collected during time 1 survey and the same respondents were contacted again during time 2. The entire process was completed

over a period of approximately six months. In the absence of a reliable sampling frame, the minimum sample size for achieving an adequate level of statistical power to test the proposed theoretical model was used as a reference point, which was determined to be 120 based on the guidelines developed by VanVoorhis and Morgan (2007). To compensate for non-response, 300 paper surveys in total were distributed, out of which 250 completed surveys (time 1 and time 2) were received (response rate = 83%). Three responses were found to be unengaged and removed, yielding a usable sample size of 247.

Owing to the male-dominated nature of Pakistan's public sector, the sample consisted of 237 males (96%) and only 10 females (4%). The majority of respondents (91.9%) were under the age of forty while the rest were between the ages of 40 and 60. With respect to education level, 45 respondents possessed a diploma-level certification (18.2%), 136 Bachelor's (55.1%), and 66 Master's (26.7%). In terms of work experience, 60 respondents had less than five years' experience (24.3%), 129 had six to fifteen years' experience (52.2%), and 58 had more than fifteen years' experience (23.5%). Among the types of projects reported on by the respondents, 120 were construction (28.6%), 83 were training and development (33.6%), and 44 were machinery installation (17.8%).

### 3.2. Time 1 Measures

**Servant leadership.** We used the 7-item short form version of the servant leadership scale developed by Liden et al. (2015), based on the original seven-dimensional scale by Liden et al. (2008). Items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. A sample item is: "My leader makes my career development a priority" ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

**Work engagement.** We assessed respondents' work engagement using a 9-item scale adapted by Ding et al. (2017) based on the original measures of Rich et al. (2010) and He et al. (2014). Items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. A sample item is: "I devote a lot of energy to my job" ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

### 3.3. Time 2 Measures

**Project Work withdrawal.** Respondents rated their level of work withdrawal on a 6-item scale based on the psychological withdrawal scale developed by Lehman and Simpson (1992). Response scale anchors ranged from 1 = almost never to 5 = very often. A sample item is: "Thought about leaving current project" ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

**Project success.** A composite measure of project success was used, in line with previous studies (Aga et al., 2016; Bryde, 2008; Mir & Pinnington, 2014). The 14-item measure was developed by Aga et al. (2016) drawing upon various sources, particularly Pinto and Prescott (1990). The scale covers various project success dimensions ranging from time, cost, positive outcomes, end benefits, and stakeholder satisfaction. Respondents were asked to rate the performance of a previously completed project they had been involved in on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. A sample item is: "The project was completed according to the budget allocated" ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

## 4. Results

The means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of the variables in the proposed theoretical model are summarized in Table 1. The influence of five control variables was examined

during data analysis: respondents' age, qualification, gender, experience, and type of project. None of the control variables were found to have any significant influence on the model variables.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations

Variable	Mean	S.D.	SL	WE	PWW	PS
Servant Leadership (SL)	5.75	1.07	(.91)			
Work Engagement (WE)	3.96	.63	.40**	(.92)		
Project Work Withdrawal (PWW)	1.43	.71	-.57**	-.53**	(.89)	
Project Success (PS)	5.23	.67	.56**	.49**	-.75**	(0.90)

\*\*  $p < .01$ , values in parentheses represent Cronbach's alpha scores

#### 4.1. Model Estimation

Model estimation was conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM) in AMOS. Due to the inherently inverse relation between work engagement and project work withdrawal, their error terms were correlated to improve model fit as recommended by AMOS modification indices. The final model indicated a Chi-square/degrees of freedom ( $\chi^2/df$ ) value of 1.750, which is below the acceptable threshold of 5 (Wheaton, 1977) as well as the recommended threshold of 3 (Carmines & McIver, 1981). Additionally, the goodness of fit index (GFI) and comparative fit index (CFI) values were both greater than the recommended threshold of 0.95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), whereas the normed fit index (NFI) was greater than the acceptable threshold of 0.90 (Byrne, 2013). Furthermore, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0.55 was below the acceptable threshold of 0.08 (Browne et al., 1993). Therefore, the proposed model was found to be a good fit with the data.

#### 4.2. Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis testing was conducted using SEM. The standardized path coefficients and significance levels, as well as the indirect effects, are summarized in Figure 1.

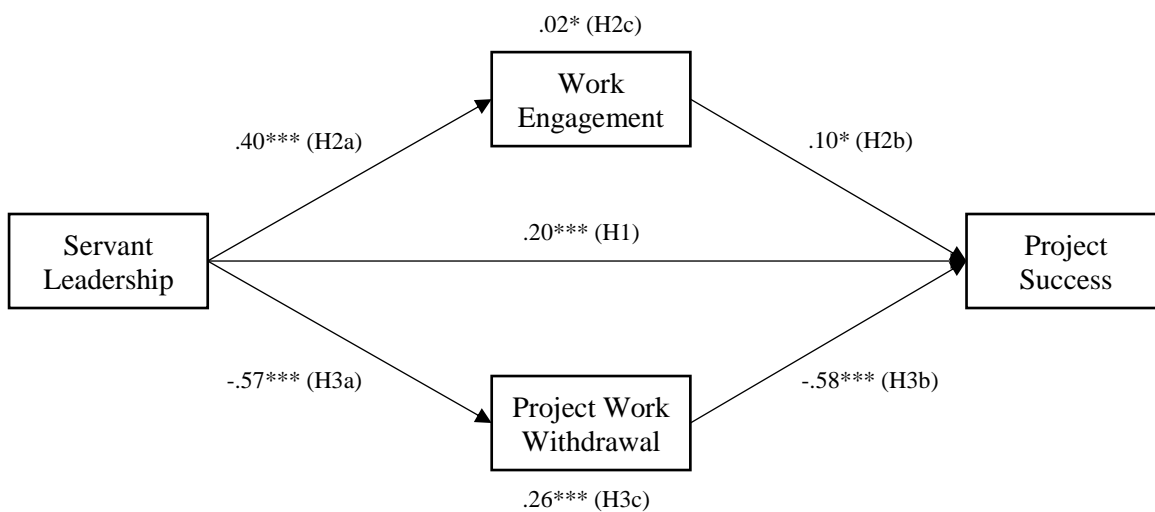


Figure 1. Standardized Path Coefficients for the Hypothesized Theoretical Model

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Servant leadership was found to have a significant positive effect on project success (standardized path estimate = .20,  $p < .001$ ); hence, H1 was supported. Servant leadership was also found to be positively related to work engagement (estimate = .40,  $p < .001$ ), thereby supporting H2a; while work engagement was found to have a weaker but significant positive effect on project success (estimate = .10,  $p < .05$ ), thereby supporting H2b. Servant leadership was found to have a strong negative effect on project work withdrawal (estimate = -.57,  $p < .001$ ), thereby supporting H3a; while project work withdrawal was found to be negatively related to project success (estimate = -.58,  $p < .001$ ), thereby supporting H3b.

To test the mediation hypotheses, bootstrapping with bias-corrected 95% confidence estimates was used in AMOS. In line with the recommendations of Preacher and Hayes (2008), 5,000 bootstrap resamples were used. The mediation analysis was conducted for each mediating path individually by nullifying the direct path between the independent variable and the other mediating variable in the model, while leaving all other paths in place. Subsequently, a parallel mediation analysis was conducted with both mediating paths included in the model simultaneously. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Mediation Analyses

Path	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Result
SL → WE → PS	.24***	.22***	.02*	Partial Mediation
SL → PWW → PS	.48***	.21***	.26***	Partial Mediation
Both Paths in Parallel	.57***	.20***	.37***	Partial Mediation

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

The results indicate that work engagement partially mediates the relationship between servant leadership and project success. The indirect effect was found to be marginally significant (estimate = .02,  $p < .05$ ); hence, H2c is supported. Project work withdrawal was also found to partially mediate the relationship, although the indirect effect was found to be much stronger (estimate = .26,  $p < .001$ ); thus, H3c is supported. Furthermore, it was found that both mediators in parallel significantly and partially mediate the effect of servant leadership on project success (estimate = .37,  $p < .001$ ). In fact, the combined indirect effect was found to be greater than the sum of individual indirect effects. Therefore, the results indicate strong support for the proposed parallel mediation model.

## 5. Discussion

The present research sought to contribute to the growing literature on servant leadership by empirically examining its influence on followers' work-related behaviors, as well as extending the understanding of this concept in the domain of project management. Based on the tenets of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964b), we posited that servant leadership would have a positive influence on project success, both directly as well as indirectly through the dual mechanisms of improving employees' work engagement while simultaneously mitigating employees' work withdrawal behaviors. The results largely support the proposed parallel mediation model.

The growing emphasis on servant leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011) and its advantages over other leadership styles (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018; Gregory et al., 2004) is mirrored by the advent of the Information Age, signaling a shift from capital-intensive jobs towards highly specialized,

information-intensive jobs. As employees increasingly become specialists in their field of work with an ever-expanding range of expertise, the role of managers must accordingly shift from paternal overseers to facilitators, whose primary objective is to invigorate followers to perform at the peak of their abilities (Liden et al., 2014).

This research sought to address the dearth of empirical evidence in the literature pertaining to the effectiveness of servant leadership in the context of projects. First, we examined the relationship between servant leadership and project success. Our results indicate that servant leadership has a positive effect on project success, which supports the results of previous studies that found relationship-oriented leaders to be more effective in achieving favorable project outcomes through their followers (Lee-Kelley & Kin Leong, 2003; Mäkilouko, 2004). Servant leadership is particularly pertinent in the context of projects since project managers are generalists and usually lack the technical expertise to understand the intricacies of their team members' work. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that project managers often have limited control over team members' remuneration and access to only a limited range of disciplinary measures. Under these circumstances, building trust-based social relationships becomes critical and hence, an effective strategy for managers is to build mutually rewarding social exchange relationships with project team members. Therefore, we posit that servant leadership, due to its inherent focus on building social exchange relationships (Lemoine et al., 2018) and facilitating followers by prioritizing the fulfilment of their needs (Greenleaf, 1970), is particularly well-suited to address the challenges faced by managers in the context of projects.

Second, we examined the relationships of servant leadership with followers' work engagement and work withdrawal behaviors. Our results indicate that servant leadership has a positive effect on followers' work engagement, thereby corroborating the findings of previous studies (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; De Clercq et al., 2014; Ling et al., 2016). Reciprocity, referring to the act of one party repaying obligations to another, is among the most frequently studied exchange norms in social exchange theory (Gouldner, 1960), that has often been used to explain why employees exhibit positive behaviors (Settoon et al., 1996). This norm suggests that followers would be inclined to reciprocate the positive behaviors of servant leaders by engaging in positive behaviors in turn. Hence, followers would be more likely to exhibit a high level of engagement with their work. Our results also indicate that servant leadership has a strong negative effect on followers' work withdrawal behaviors, in line with the findings of previous research (Hunter et al., 2013b). The results suggest that the nurturing, pro-social behaviors of servant leaders have a strong motivational effect on followers, inducing them to be more satisfied with their work environment and to exhibit a sense of ownership in their work.

Third, we examined the relationships of followers' work engagement and work withdrawal behaviors with project success. Work engagement was found to have a significant positive effect on project success. This finding helps to address the dearth of empirical research on this construct in the context of projects. Engaged project team members are likely to be more productive, which in turn improves the performance of the project overall. On the other hand, a relatively stronger negative relationship was found between project work withdrawal and project success. This is yet another empirical contribution of this study to the extant literature that helps to address the limited research on the impacts of work withdrawal behaviors in the project context. The strength of the effect is possibly due to work withdrawal being especially detrimental in the context of projects. Since project managers often lack the technical expertise to gauge the work of their followers, which is coupled with their limited ability to enforce corrective incentives and sanctions, it is likely that withdrawal behaviors by project team members and ancillary staff would go unnoticed and/or

uncorrected. Naturally, team members' productivity, and hence project performance, would suffer as a result. The strength of this relationship suggest that greater attention is needed towards studying the antecedents and impacts of work withdrawal behaviors in project management research.

Fourth, we examined the mediating roles of work engagement and work withdrawal in the relationship between servant leadership and project success. Significant indirect effects were found in both cases, indicating that both work engagement and work withdrawal partially mediate the relationship between servant leadership and project success. In other words, servant leadership indirectly improves project success by simultaneously improving followers' work engagement as well as diminishing their work withdrawal behaviors. The parallel mediation model developed in this study also enabled the relative comparison of the two indirect effects. It was found that the indirect effect via project work withdrawal is clearly more significant, i.e. the mitigation of work withdrawal behaviors is a relatively more effective mechanism through which servant leadership improves project success. This can be attributed in part to the fact that work withdrawal was found to be a more significant predictor of project success than work engagement. However, the findings also suggest a need to look beyond reciprocity in social exchanges and towards, perhaps, motivational theories to uncover the underlying mechanisms through which servant leaders inhibit work withdrawal behaviors in followers. For example, Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory proposed a dichotomy between factors that cause satisfaction and factors that cause dissatisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1966). When considered in light of this theory, our findings suggest that servant leadership may be more effective in mitigating factors for dissatisfaction that lead to work withdrawal in the context of projects, as compared to enhancing factors of satisfaction.

## **5.1. Implications**

The core theoretical contribution of this research to the extant project management literature is evaluating the effect of servant leadership on project success. A parallel mediation model was developed that identified two mechanisms through which servant leadership influences project success: work engagement and project work withdrawal, both of which have been scarcely researched in the project management literature. Moreover, this study also contributes to the application of social exchange theory in the context of projects, particularly the norm of reciprocity in leader-follower exchanges, to explain how managers' leadership behaviors induce followers to achieve positive project outcomes.

For project management practitioners, the results of this study should invigorate interest in servant leadership as the preferred leadership style for obtaining positive project outcomes, due to its apparent good fit with the inherent challenges faced by managers in most projects. A further benefit of servant leaders is that they establish a serving culture that induces followers to exhibit servant leadership behaviors as well (Liden et al., 2014). This would be particularly advantageous in larger, more complex projects that tend to involve additional hierarchy levels and greater information asymmetry between managers and followers. Another implication of this research is that organizations engaging in projects should sensitize their monitoring and control systems to identify and address work withdrawal behaviors in project team members. If left unchecked, such behaviors can have a detrimental impact on project performance.

## 5.2. Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

A strength of this study is the use of a two-wave data collection procedure that serves to mitigate the influence of common method bias on the validity of the data. Additionally, the use of SEM allowed for the simultaneous estimation of the entire parallel mediation model, thus allowing for relative comparisons of the direct effects of, and indirect effects through, both mediating variables. Hence, the parallel mediation model allowed for the extraction of richer theoretical insights on the mechanisms through which servant leadership influences project success.

A limitation of this study is the use of a cross-sectional design that restricts our ability to draw causal inferences. To alleviate this, all efforts were made to base the hypothesized relationships in the model on sound logic and theoretical justifications. More rigorous causal inferences may be drawn through longitudinal research design. Another limitation is that, owing to the lack of a reliable sampling frame, non-probability sampling techniques were used, which limit the generalizability of the results.

An important direction for further research is investigating the role of work withdrawal in the context of projects. Despite being a significant predictor of project success, this construct has been largely neglected in project management research. In particular, there is a need to elucidate the antecedents of work withdrawal and how they interact with project managers' leadership styles, especially servant leadership. Additionally, further research on servant leadership is needed in order to shed light on its comparative benefits over other leadership styles under various project contexts, as well as determining which specific contexts are most conducive to servant leaders, if any. Furthermore, we suggest that greater emphasis is needed on the human side of project management, which has historically been an under-researched area in project management (Keegan et al., 2018) and is rife with opportunities for generating insights to improve theory and practice. This may well be the long-sought key to addressing the stagnation of project success rates over the past several years PMI (2018) that would help unlock the potential of people, and hence projects.

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