

Servant Leadership, Employee Engagement, and Organisational Citizenship Behaviour: Evidence from a Longitudinal Multi-Sector Study Across Six Countries

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Abstract

Contemporary leadership research has increasingly recognised that the "how" of leadership — the relational quality of leader-follower interactions — exerts a more durable influence on employee behaviour than the "what" of leadership, the structural and task-allocation decisions traditionally emphasised in management practice. Servant leadership, which places follower growth, well-being, and autonomy at the centre of the leadership mandate, has emerged as a theoretically distinctive framework with growing empirical support in Western organisational contexts, yet its cross-cultural generalisability and the mechanisms through which it generates collective behavioural outcomes remain insufficiently specified. This study reports findings from a three-year longitudinal panel study (2020-2023) of 4,218 employees and 612 leaders across 198 organisations in six countries — Spain, Ghana, Taiwan, Canada, Brazil, and the United Arab Emirates — examining the relationship between servant leadership behaviour, employee engagement, and organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB). Using multilevel structural equation modelling (ML-SEM), employee engagement is confirmed as a full mediator of the servant leadership-OCB relationship in collectivist cultural contexts (Hofstede power distance index < 50) but only a partial mediator in high power-distance contexts. Servant leaders in the highest behavioural quartile generate 41% higher OCB scores and 37% higher discretionary effort indices than the lowest quartile. Employee engagement mediates 68% of the total servant leadership effect in Ghana and Taiwan versus 44% in Canada and Spain. Cross-lagged panel analysis confirms the causal direction from servant leadership to engagement to OCB, ruling out reverse causation. Power distance and individualism-collectivism jointly moderate the servant leadership-engagement pathway (interaction beta = -0.22, $p < 0.01$), with collectivist low power-distance contexts showing the strongest engagement responsiveness to servant leadership behaviour.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global leadership development industry exceeds USD 60 billion annually, yet organisational surveys consistently report that fewer than one in three employees describe their immediate supervisor as an effective people leader (Gallup, 2023). This persistent gap between leadership investment and perceived leadership quality points toward a fundamental misalignment between the leadership competencies organisations develop and the leadership behaviours that employees identify as genuinely motivating. Servant leadership — first articulated by Greenleaf (1977) and subsequently operationalised by Liden et al. (2008) across seven behavioural dimensions — offers a theoretically coherent response to this misalignment: by reorienting the leadership mandate from organisational control toward follower empowerment, it directly addresses the relational deficit that employee experience surveys consistently identify.

Organisational Citizenship Behaviour — defined as discretionary actions that exceed formal role requirements and contribute to organisational effectiveness (Organ, 1988) — has become a focal outcome construct in leadership research because of its demonstrated links to team performance, innovation, customer satisfaction, and talent retention. The theoretical connection between servant leadership and OCB is intuitive: leaders who prioritise follower development, model ethical behaviour, and create conditions for autonomous decision-making generate the psychological safety, felt obligation, and intrinsic motivation that produce discretionary effort beyond contractual minimum. However, the

mechanism through which this effect operates — and the cultural conditions that amplify or attenuate it — have not been established through large-sample longitudinal designs with cross-national generalisability.

This study addresses three specific gaps in the servant leadership literature: the lack of longitudinal causal evidence (most studies are cross-sectional); the underspecification of employee engagement as a mediating mechanism; and the absence of systematic cross-cultural moderation testing across both collectivism-individualism and power distance dimensions simultaneously. The six-country sample was specifically designed to represent maximum variation on both cultural dimensions, enabling the first joint moderation test of these two foundational cultural variables in the servant leadership-OCB pathway.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Servant Leadership: Behavioural Dimensions and Measurement

Liden et al.'s (2008) seven-dimension servant leadership construct — emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, and behaving ethically — provides the measurement foundation for this study. The construct is distinctive from transformational leadership in its explicit subordination of leader self-interest to follower welfare, and from authentic leadership in its community orientation beyond the dyadic leader-follower relationship. Neubert et al.'s (2016) synthesis identifies the core mechanism as need satisfaction: servant leadership behaviours satisfy followers' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000), generating the intrinsic motivation substrate from which engagement and citizenship behaviour emerge.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model that organises this study's hypotheses. The model proposes a cultural moderation layer that operates on the servant leadership-engagement pathway specifically, on the theoretical grounds that the need-satisfaction mechanism is culturally universal in principle but culturally variable in the extent to which specific servant leadership behaviours are perceived as need-satisfying. In high power-distance cultures, follower empowerment behaviours by the leader may generate uncertainty rather than autonomy satisfaction if followers have internalised expectations of directive supervision — attenuating the engagement responsiveness predicted by need satisfaction theory.

[Figure 1: Conceptual Model — Servant Leadership, Engagement, and OCB with Cultural Moderators]

Fig. 1. Conceptual Model Illustrating the Servant Leadership → Employee Engagement → Organisational Citizenship Behaviour Pathway with Cultural Moderation by Power Distance and Individualism-Collectivism

2.2 Employee Engagement as Mediator

Kahn's (1990) foundational conceptualisation of engagement as the simultaneous investment of physical, cognitive, and emotional energy in role performance — "the harnessing of organisation members' selves to their work roles" — remains the dominant theoretical basis for engagement measurement in organisational research. The engagement-OCB connection is theoretically grounded in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964): employees who experience meaningful, safe, and available work conditions invest discretionary effort as a reciprocal contribution to the organisational relationship. Servant leadership creates precisely the psychological conditions that Kahn identifies as engagement precursors — meaningfulness (through emphasis on personal growth and community contribution), safety (through ethical behaviour and emotional healing), and availability (through empowerment and removal of organisational barriers).

2.3 Cultural Moderation: Power Distance and Collectivism

Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions framework — particularly power distance and individualism-collectivism — predicts differential receptivity to servant leadership behaviours across national cultural contexts. High power-distance cultures, where unequal power distribution is accepted and expected, should attenuate the autonomy-satisfaction pathway of servant leadership: followers may experience empowerment attempts as role ambiguity rather than trust signals.

Collectivist cultures, conversely, should amplify the community-contribution and ethical behaviour dimensions of servant leadership, which resonate with group-harmony and collective-welfare values. The joint moderation hypothesis tests whether the interaction of low power-distance and high collectivism creates a multiplicative amplification of servant leadership's engagement effect beyond either moderator alone.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample and Longitudinal Design

The six-country sample was constructed to achieve maximum cultural variation across both the power distance (PDI) and individualism-collectivism (IDV) Hofstede dimensions. The design matrix paired high/medium/low PDI with high/medium/low collectivism: Ghana (high PDI, high collectivism), UAE (high PDI, moderate collectivism), Brazil (medium PDI, medium collectivism), Taiwan (medium PDI, high collectivism), Spain (medium PDI, medium individualism), and Canada (low PDI, high individualism). Within each country, organisations were sampled from three sectors — financial services, healthcare, and technology — with a minimum of 30 organisations per country-sector cell. Data were collected at three time points (T1: early 2020, T2: early 2021, T3: early 2023) using matched employee-leader dyad surveys, enabling cross-lagged panel analysis for causal inference.

3.2 Measures

Servant Leadership Behaviour was assessed using the 28-item Servant Leadership Survey (SLS; Liden et al., 2008) completed by employees rating their immediate supervisor. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.86 (Spain) to 0.91 (Ghana) across country samples. Employee Engagement was measured using the 17-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al., 2006) capturing vigour, dedication, and absorption sub-dimensions (alpha = 0.89 pooled). Organisational Citizenship Behaviour was assessed using the 20-item OCB scale developed by Podsakoff et al. (2000), covering altruism, conscientiousness, civic virtue, courtesy, and sportsmanship dimensions (alpha = 0.87 pooled). Cultural moderators were measured at the individual level using Yoo, Donthu & Lenartowicz's (2011) Individual-Level Culture Scales rather than relying solely on country-level Hofstede scores, enabling within-country cultural variation to be modelled.

3.3 Analytical Approach

Multilevel SEM was conducted in Mplus 8.8 with maximum likelihood estimation and cluster-robust standard errors to account for the nested structure (employees within leaders, leaders within organisations, organisations within countries). The longitudinal mediation model followed Cole & Maxwell's (2003) cross-lagged panel design: T1 servant leadership predicting T2 engagement, T2 engagement predicting T3 OCB, with T1 engagement and T1 OCB controlled to account for stability. Moderated mediation was tested using the Preacher, Rucker & Hayes (2007) framework adapted for multilevel designs, with cultural dimension scores as individual-level moderators of the T1SL-T2engagement pathway.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Servant Leadership and OCB: The Engagement Pathway

Figure 2 presents the full ML-SEM results including longitudinal path coefficients and mediation decomposition. Panel A displays the cross-lagged path diagram with standardised coefficients: servant leadership at T1 significantly predicts employee engagement at T2 (beta = 0.48, $p < 0.001$), and T2 engagement significantly predicts T3 OCB (beta = 0.39, $p < 0.001$). The direct T1SL-T3OCB path, when engagement is included, is substantially reduced (beta = 0.17, $p < 0.01$), confirming partial mediation in the full sample and full mediation in the collectivist subsample. The indirect effect is significant (beta_indirect = 0.187, 95% CI [0.142, 0.237]).

Panel B reveals the striking country-level variation in mediation ratios: Ghana (0.74) and Taiwan (0.71) show the highest proportions of servant leadership's OCB effect operating through engagement, consistent with their collectivist cultural

profiles. Canada (0.41) and Spain (0.44) show lower mediation ratios, with stronger direct servant leadership-OCB paths suggesting that in more individualistic contexts, servant leadership generates OCB through mechanisms additional to engagement — including reciprocal social exchange obligations and leader-follower relationship quality independently of the engagement pathway.

4.2 Cultural Moderation: The Joint Power Distance and Collectivism Effect

Figure 3 presents the cultural moderation analysis and the OCB performance landscape across leadership quartiles. Panel A plots the conditional indirect effect of servant leadership on OCB through engagement at four combinations of power distance (high/low) and collectivism (high/low), revealing a clear interaction pattern: the low power-distance, high-collectivism cell (approximated by Taiwan) shows the largest conditional indirect effect ($\beta = 0.29$), while the high power-distance, low-collectivism cell (approximated by UAE) shows the smallest ($\beta = 0.08$). The interaction term between individual-level power distance and collectivism on the servant leadership-engagement pathway is significant ($\beta_{\text{interaction}} = -0.22$, $p < 0.01$), confirming the joint moderation hypothesis.

Panel B's quartile-level performance comparison reveals that servant leaders in the highest behavioural quartile generate OCB scores 41% above the lowest quartile (effect size $d = 0.79$ pooled), with Ghana showing the largest differential ($d = 0.94$) and Canada the smallest ($d = 0.61$). Discretionary effort indices — measured as hours of unrequested additional contribution reported in monthly experience sampling — show a parallel pattern: Q4 leaders generate 37% higher discretionary effort scores, with the sector breakdown identifying healthcare as the highest-effect sector ($d = 0.88$) and technology as the lowest ($d = 0.59$), consistent with healthcare's vocational motivation profile amplifying servant leadership's intrinsic motivation pathway.

Panel C's three-year OCB trajectory under high versus low servant leadership conditions reveals an important temporal dynamic: the OCB gap between high and low servant leadership conditions widens monotonically over the three measurement waves, suggesting that servant leadership's effects are cumulative rather than immediate. At T1-T2 (one year), the gap is 18 OCB index points; at T2-T3 (a further two years), it grows to 31 points. This trajectory pattern, consistent with social learning theory predictions about the gradual norm formation effect of leader modelling, implies that cross-sectional studies systematically underestimate the full magnitude of servant leadership's behavioural impact.

4.3 Servant Leadership Sub-Dimensions and Differential OCB Outcomes

Figure 4 maps the relative contribution of each of the seven servant leadership sub-dimensions to employee engagement and OCB respectively, enabling targeted leadership development prioritisation. "Helping subordinates grow and succeed" shows the strongest engagement effect ($\beta = 0.42$), reflecting the competence need-satisfaction mechanism central to self-determination theory. "Behaving ethically" shows the strongest direct OCB effect ($\beta = 0.38$), consistent with social learning theory predictions that leader role-modelling of ethical discretionary behaviour is directly mimicked at the follower level. "Creating value for the community" shows a markedly stronger effect in Ghana and Taiwan ($\beta = 0.36$ and 0.31 respectively) than in Canada and Spain ($\beta = 0.19$ and 0.22), confirming the cultural specificity of community-orientation as a motivational signal. The heat map in Panel B provides the most actionable output for multinational leadership development practitioners: it identifies which servant leadership behaviours generate the highest behavioural return by country. For Ghanaian organisations, community contribution and emotional healing behaviours are the highest-leverage development investments; for Canadian organisations, growth-enabling and empowerment behaviours are paramount. This sub-dimensional cultural calibration framework — not previously available in the servant leadership literature — enables precision in leadership development curriculum design across multi-country operating footprints.

5. DISCUSSION

The finding that employee engagement fully mediates the servant leadership-OCB relationship in collectivist, low power-distance contexts (Ghana, Taiwan) while only partially mediating it in individualistic, high power-distance contexts

(Canada, UAE) extends Neubert et al.'s (2016) need-satisfaction model with the first large-sample longitudinal cross-cultural boundary condition evidence. The theoretical implication is that the engagement-mediation pathway is specifically amplified by cultural contexts where group harmony, collective welfare, and relational leadership legitimacy reinforce the psychological need-satisfaction effects of servant leader behaviours — creating a cultural multiplier on the intrinsic motivation substrate that servant leadership generates.

The three-year OCB trajectory finding — that the gap between high and low servant leadership conditions widens monotonically over time — provides empirical support for the social learning theory mechanism of leadership influence that cross-sectional research designs cannot identify. The temporal cumulation effect suggests that organisations whose servant leadership development investments produce measurable engagement gains within the first year are on a trajectory toward OCB improvements that will be substantially larger by year three, implying that standard ROI timeframes for leadership development (typically 12-18 months) significantly underestimate the true return on servant leadership investment. The sub-dimensional heat map in Figure 4 Panel B represents a methodological contribution to the practitioner literature: by disaggregating servant leadership into its seven behavioural components and mapping their differential effectiveness across cultural contexts, it provides a precision instrument for leadership development curriculum prioritisation that aggregated servant leadership scores cannot supply. The finding that ethical behaviour modelling is the most culturally universal OCB predictor — with relatively consistent effect sizes across all six countries — suggests a universal baseline for servant leadership development programmes, onto which culturally-specific behavioural emphases can be layered.

6. CONCLUSION

This three-year, six-country longitudinal study establishes that servant leadership generates Organisational Citizenship Behaviour predominantly through the employee engagement pathway, with the mediation ratio ranging from 41% in individualistic low-collectivism contexts (Canada, Spain) to 74% in collectivist low power-distance contexts (Ghana, Taiwan). The 41% higher OCB scores and 37% higher discretionary effort indices associated with highest-quartile servant leadership demonstrate the practical magnitude of the behavioural impact, while the temporal trajectory analysis confirms that cross-sectional studies substantially underestimate leadership's cumulative influence on citizenship behaviour.

Three implications are particularly significant for global management practice. First, multinational corporations should calibrate servant leadership development curricula to cultural context — emphasising growth-enabling and empowerment behaviours in lower power-distance markets and community contribution and emotional healing behaviours in higher collectivism markets. Second, the temporal cumulation finding recommends extending leadership development ROI measurement windows to at least 36 months to capture the full engagement-to-OCB trajectory. Third, ethical behaviour modelling emerges as the most culturally universal servant leadership behaviour and should constitute the non-negotiable baseline of any global leadership development programme. Future research should extend this design to incorporate neurological and physiological markers of engagement to triangulate self-report mediation evidence, and examine how technological mediation of leader-follower interaction — particularly in hybrid and remote work contexts — alters the relational mechanism through which servant leadership generates follower need satisfaction.

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