

THE EFFECT OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP ON INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR OF ENTERPRISE EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

In today's increasingly dynamic globalization context, innovation is crucial for organizations to achieve competitive advantages. Therefore, any organization attaches great importance to the innovative behaviour of its employees. Based on 642 survey samples from a cigarette factory in Kunming, China, this study explores the impact of service-oriented leadership on employee innovation behaviour. The research results show that service-oriented leadership has a significant impact on the innovative behaviour of enterprise employees, that is, when enterprise leaders display more service-oriented leadership styles, the innovative behaviour of enterprise employees will be stimulated, and they will show more innovative behaviour in their work. This research result provides a theoretical basis and policy reference for Chinese enterprises to advocate a people-oriented leadership style and promote innovative behaviour among employees.

Keywords: Servant leadership, Innovative behaviour, Enterprise employee

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly dynamic globalization context, innovation is crucial for organizations to achieve competitive advantages (Anderson et al., 2014; Shin et al., 2017). China is one of the fastest-growing economies, and innovation is particularly prominent and important (Cai et al., 2018; Kwan and Chiu, 2015). In a knowledge-based society, innovative behaviour is often seen as a key factor for organizational success (Anderson et al., 2004). Organizational innovation originates from employee innovation (Janssen & Vliert, 2004) and is described as the self-initiated behaviour of generating and implementing new ideas to benefit individuals or organizations (Nehles et al., 2017). It can be said that employees' innovative behaviour, such as developing and implementing novel and useful ideas, is the foundation of all organizational innovation (Scott and Bruce, 1994). Therefore, it is crucial to explore mechanisms for effectively promoting employee innovation behaviour in the context of China (Wang et al., 2019).

Servant leadership is a constantly changing leadership style that adapts to management needs (Wang & Meng, 2019). Service oriented leaders exhibit service-oriented behaviour and selflessly work for the benefit of their employees (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011). The role of service-oriented

leadership is to serve employees by promoting their growth and development, thereby enabling them to achieve long-term development (Chiniara & Benteen, 2018; Liden et al., 2008). Altruism in service-oriented leadership has been proven to have a positive impact on employees' innovation or creativity (Neubert et al., 2008) (Yoshida et al., 2014), which can create an atmosphere of trust, motivate employees to take risks and develop innovative ways (Kark & Carmeli, 2009). Lee et al. (2020) believe that service-oriented leadership is positively correlated with individual creativity. The research by scholars such as Wang et al. (2019) further confirms that service-oriented leadership has a significant impact on innovation behaviour. Scholars such as Yoshida et al. (2013) pointed out that service-oriented leadership promotes personal relationship identification and collective prototype with leaders, thereby promoting employee creativity and team innovation. The research by scholars such as Iqbal et al. (2020) further confirms that service-oriented leadership has a direct and positive impact on employees' innovative behaviour. Scholars such as Li (2020) believe that service-oriented leadership can positively predict employees' innovative behaviour. Scholars such as Su et al. (2020) pointed out that service-oriented leadership can promote employees' innovative behaviour and intrinsic motivation.

The social exchange theory Blau (1964) can be used to determine the relationship between service-oriented leadership and employee innovation behaviour. The social exchange theory is mainly based on the principle of reciprocity, which means that the behaviour of one exchange partner depends on the behaviour of another exchange partner. Previous research clearly lacks empirical research on the innovative behaviour of enterprise employees. Therefore, this study will be based on social exchange theory and survey data of Chinese government enterprise employees, exploring the impact of service-oriented leadership on innovative behaviour of enterprise employees, and providing valuable suggestions for Chinese enterprise decision-makers.

Servant leadership was first proposed by Greenleaf (1977), who pointed out that "servant leadership is first and foremost about service. It begins with a natural feeling of wanting to provide service first, that is, to serve first. Then, conscious choices bring about a person's desire to lead, which is completely different from those who first become leaders." Other leadership models and theories focus on the actions of leaders, Servant leadership focuses on the leader's personality and commitment to serving others (Parris & Peachey, 2013) Theorists have extended Greenleaf's theory and established a service-oriented leadership model, such as Ehrhart (2004), which defines seven characteristics of service-oriented leadership: establishing relationships with subordinates, empowering subordinates, helping subordinates grow and succeed, behaving ethically, using conceptual skills, prioritizing subordinates, and creating value for people outside the organization.

The social exchange theory Blau (1964) can be used to determine the relationship between service-oriented leadership and employee innovation behaviour. The social exchange theory is mainly based on the principle of reciprocity, which means that the behaviour of one exchange partner depends on the behaviour of another exchange partner. According to this theoretical perspective, service-oriented leadership is positively correlated with employees' innovative behaviour. Wang et al. (2019) and other scholars found that service-oriented leadership has a significant impact on innovation behaviour. Scholars such as Yoshida et al. (2013) pointed out that service-oriented leadership promotes personal relationship identification and collective prototype with leaders, thereby promoting employee creativity and team innovation. The research by scholars such as Iqbal et al. (2020) further confirms that service-oriented leadership has a direct and positive impact on employees' innovative behaviour. Scholars such

as Li et al. (2020) believe that service-oriented leadership can positively predict employees' innovative behaviour. Scholars such as Su et al. (2020) pointed out that service-oriented leadership can promote employees' innovative behaviour and intrinsic motivation. In sum, the present put forward the following hypothesis, namely, servant leadership has a positive effect on employees' innovative behaviour.

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants and sample

We collected questionnaires from a famous tobacco company located in Kunming, China. To collect data, we visited the Human Resources Office of Kunming Cigarette Factory and randomly selected 660 full-time employees from different departments of the enterprise. Each participant is required to anonymously fill out the questionnaire. Finally, after deleting 18 questionnaires with missing data, this study obtained 642 valid samples, with an overall response rate of 97.27%.

Among the 642 employees, 291 (45.3%) were male and 351 (54.7%) were female (Table 1). 160 under 25 years old (24.9%), 237 between 26 and 30 years old (36.9%), 131 between 31 and 40 years old (20.4%), 76 between 41 and 50 years old (11.8%), and 38 over 51 years old (5.9%). In terms of education level, 5.1% have a master's degree or above, 86.1% have a bachelor's degree, 7.5% have a college diploma, and 1.2% have graduated from high school or not. In terms of work experience, 241 people (37.5%) worked for 5 years or less, 196 people (30.5%) worked for 6-10 years, 86 people (13.4%) worked for 11-15 years, 48 people (7.5%) worked for 16-20 years, and 71 people (11.1%) worked for 21 years or more.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of participants in the present study ($N = 642$).

Variables	Categories	N	%	Variables	Categories	N	%
Gender	Male	291	45.3	Work tenure	5 years or less	241	37.5
	Female	351	54.7		6-10 years	196	30.5
Age	25 years old or less	160	24.9		11-15 years	86	13.4
	26-30 years old	237	36.9		16-20 years	48	7.5
	31-40 years old	131	20.4		21years or more	71	11.1
	41-50 years old	76	11.8	Annual income	35000 yuan or less	13	2
	51 years old or more	38	5.9		35000- 70000 yuan	68	10.6
Education	High school	8	1.2		70000-11000 yuan	383	59.7
	Diploma	48	7.5		11000-15000 yuan	149	23.2
	Bachelor	553	86.1		15000-20000 yuan	26	4
	Masters/Doctoral	33	5.1		200000-25000 yuan	3	0.5

2.2 Measures

Servant leadership adopts a simplified version of the scale revised by Liden et al. (2014), which includes 7 items, such as "My leader can judge whether there is a problem in the work" and "My leader will prioritize my career development". The Cronbach's α of this scale is 0.88.

We used the five-item scale designed by Zheng et al. (2019) to measure innovation behavior. Sample projects include 'I will generate creative ideas during the work process' and 'I will develop sufficient plans and schedules to implement new ideas'. The Cronbach's α of this scale is 0.827.

RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

The mean, standard deviation, and correlation between the study variables are shown in Table 2. Servant leadership is positively correlated with innovative behaviour ($r=0.556$), age is positively correlated with innovative behaviour ($r=0.171$, $p<0.01$), work experience is positively correlated with innovative behaviour ($r=0.097$, $p<0.05$), and servant leadership is positively correlated with innovative behaviour ($r=0.556$, $p<0.01$).

Table 2: Means, standard deviations and correlations among variables in the present study.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1						
2. Age	0.108**	1					
3. Education	-0.112**	0.281**	1				
4. Work tenure	0.119**	0.608**	-0.250**	1			
5. Annual income	0.25	0.287**	0.136**	0.276**	1		
6. SL	0.19	-0.055	-0.004	-0.054	-0.027	1	
7. IB	0.03	0.171**	-0.072	0.097*	0.036	0.556**	1
Mean	0.453	2.37	2.95	2.24	5.76	2.81	3.01
SD	0.498	1.15	0.417	1.32	1.53	0.691	0.808

Note : $N = 642$. * $P<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$ *** $P<0.001$; SL = servant leadership, IB = innovative behavior.

3.2 Hypothesis Test

To examine the relationship between service-oriented leadership and innovative behaviour of enterprise employees, we conducted multiple regressions using SPSS 26. We proposed two models in multiple regressions. The results of Model 1 in Table 3 indicate that age has a significant impact on the innovative behaviour of enterprise employees ($B=0.122$, $p<0.01$).

The results in Model 2 indicate that age has a significant and positive impact on the innovative behaviour of enterprise employees ($B=0.138$, $p<0.001$), while service-oriented leadership has a significant positive impact on the innovative behaviour of enterprise employees ($B=0.664$, $p<0.001$). Servant leadership can explain 35.1% of the innovative behaviour values of enterprise employees. Therefore, the result support the hypothesis, namely, servant leadership has a positive effect on employees' innovative behaviour.

Table 3: Results for the multiple regressions.

Variable	Innovative behaviour			
	Mode1 1		Mode1 2	
	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	2.923	0.272	0.930	0.249
1. Gender	-0.028	0.064	-0.052	0.052
2. Age	0.122**	0.036	0.138***	0.029
3. Education	-0.052	0.082	-0.028	0.067
4. Work tenure	-0.007	0.031	0.006	0.025
5. Annual income	-0.004	0.023	-0.003	0.018
6. Servant leadership			0.664***	0.037
R Square	0.030		0.351	
Adj R-squared	0.023		0.345	
R Square Change	0.030		0.321	
F-Value	3.969***		57.188***	

Note : $N = 642$. * $P<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$ *** $P<0.001$

1. Discussion and Conclusion

This study takes employees of Kunming Cigarette Factory in Yunnan Province, China as a sample to study the relationship between service-oriented leadership and employee innovation behaviour. Consistent with previous research findings (Wang et al., 2019; Iqbal et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020), our study also confirms that service-oriented leadership has a significant positive impact on innovative behaviour of enterprise employees in the Chinese context, indicating that service-oriented leadership's behavioural style can effectively stimulate employees' innovative behaviour, Further validated the previous research findings on service-oriented leadership and employee innovation behaviour. This study confirms that service-oriented leadership has a significant and positive impact on innovative behaviour and plays an important role in promoting innovative behaviour among enterprise employees, as employees with high levels of service-oriented leadership gain self-worth from their work in the enterprise.

In practice, the research conclusions of this article also provide policy references for enterprises. Firstly, organizational leaders should attach importance to improving personal qualities, enhancing their

willingness to serve the organization and employees, paying more attention to the development and progress of employees, meeting their psychological needs, enhancing their sense of organizational identity and belonging, and stimulating their internal motivation to promote organizational development (Liu Hongqi, Liu Yong, Fang Zhigeng, 2019). Secondly, establish incentive mechanisms to enhance employee initiative and stimulate innovation enthusiasm, fundamentally motivating employees to generate more innovative ideas and achieve innovative behaviour.

Of course, our research also has some limitations. Our study relies on cross-sectional self-reported data; therefore, it does not provide a clear causal relationship. In future research, it is worthwhile for scholars to further use panel or longitudinal data to avoid the possibility of common method biases. Despite the limitations mentioned above, our research aims to explore the relationship between service-oriented leadership and innovative behaviour of enterprise employees. Our research results indicate that service-oriented leadership has a direct impact on the innovative behaviour of enterprise employees. More importantly, our research has contributed to the theory and literature of service-oriented leadership by examining the key role of service-oriented leadership in improving employee innovation behaviour in the Chinese context. We hope that this study can encourage more research to explore the potential complex connection between service-oriented leadership and innovative behaviour of enterprise employees.

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