

## Servant Leadership and Voice Behavior: Self-efficacy as a Mediator

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**Abstract.** In a sample of 73.56% response rate of 662 employees in 21 work units among 9 industries, across multiple organizations, by using questionnaire with convenience sampling and stratified sampling to get data collection, the relationship among servant leadership, voice behavior and self-efficacy were examined. Using SPSS 22.0 to conduct a statistical test, results support for our hypothesized models that (1) servant leadership will have positive impact on voice behavior (2) self-efficacy will mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and moral efficacy. These finding highlight the important role in explain why servant leadership can result in voice behavior. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings, as well as limitation and suggestions for future avenues are provided.

### Introduction

Extensive researches pay more attention to the antecedents of voice (Morrison, 2014)<sup>[1]</sup>. Even though a great number of scholars have mentioned that leadership behavior and management style have significant effects on employees' voices (e.g., Edmondson 2003<sup>[2]</sup>; Morrison and Phelps 1999<sup>[3]</sup>), only a few have empirically investigated this issue. Recent study revealed the positive effects of transformational leadership on employee voice (Liu et al., 2010)<sup>[4]</sup>; and Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009)<sup>[5]</sup> found a positive relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice. While these studies provide valuable evidence for the role of leadership, research gaps also remain due to lack of considering servant leadership theory. Recent study demonstrate that servant leadership is proved to be positively related to organizational citizenship behavior (Newman, 2015)<sup>[6]</sup>. Compared with other leadership theories, servant leadership might be a more substantial theory for explaining employee voice behaviors. As voice would be positive or prohibitive, which need employees' confidence to speak up to leader, thus we suggest individual's self-efficacy can bridge the relationship between servant leadership and voice behavior.

### Theoretical Hypothesis

Voice refers to the expression of constructive opinions, suggestions, or concerns about work-related issues (Le Pine & Van Dyne, 1998)<sup>[7]</sup>. Voice may enhance employees' feelings of control, which has been shown to increase satisfaction and motivation and decrease stress (Greenberger & Strasser, 2007)<sup>[8]</sup>. Voice may lead to more positive attitudes due to the benefits associated with being able to express one's views and concerns (Morrison & Milliken, 2000)<sup>[9]</sup>. And Greenleaf proposed that servant leadership "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (Greenleaf, 1970/1991 p. 7)<sup>[10]</sup>. Contrasting servant leadership with other leadership frameworks in vogue at the time, Greenleaf emphasized motivation as the differentiating factor: The servant leader chooses to lead as an outcome of the motivation to serve. He wrote: "The servant leader.... is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possession The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant – first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served" (Greenleaf, 1970/1991, p. 7)<sup>[10]</sup>.

Drawing on social exchange theory, Servant leadership behavior creates a pervasive social context that positively affects employees' attitudes and behavior. Servant leadership can make

employees to promote commitment to the supervisor, procedural justice climate, and service climate (Walumbwa F O, Hartnell C A, Oke A. 2010)<sup>[11]</sup>, help to perceived job social support on the family satisfaction and get more quality of family life experienced by the employees’ spouses (Yang, Zhang, Kwan, & Chen, 2018)<sup>[12]</sup>. Moreover, servant leader can pass love to followers. Employees will feel an obligation to repay the organization through positive attitudes and appropriate behaviors (Eisenberger, Fasolo & Davislamastro, 1990)<sup>[13]</sup>. When followers perceive the leader as possessing desirable qualities, they aspire to be return the leader and thus provide more useful ideas to leader. Thus, servant leadership meet the highest priority needs of those being led, servant leaders not only display the most advanced level of moral development, but also inspire followers to speak up for improving organization. On the basis of this reasoning, we propose the following:

*Hypothesis 1: Servant leadership will have a positive impact on voice behavior.*

Self-efficacy has been defined as “people’s judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (Bandura, 1986, p.391)<sup>[14]</sup>. Based on social exchange theory, servant leadership behavior creates a pervasive social context that positively affects employees’ attitudes and behavior. Also, servant leadership can make employees to promote commitment to the supervisor, self-efficacy, (Walumbwa, Hartnell & Ok., 2010)<sup>[10]</sup>, help to perceived the whole organizational culture, inducing greater performance and the well-being of the workforce for increased engagement (Sousa, & Dierendonck, 2014)<sup>[15]</sup>, building trust with leader (Burton, Peachey & Wells, 2016)<sup>[16]</sup>. Furthermore, such leader behavior provides situational cues from which followers’ interpret and understand their environment (Takeuchi, Chen, & Lepak, 2009)<sup>[17]</sup> and pass love to followers, which would greatly improve their condidence of their capabilities to give up voice for improving organizational performances. At this time, employees will feel servant leader cost many resources, effect and feelings among them, which would make subordinate to feel being valued in the organization, resulting an obligation to repay the organization through positive attitudes and appropriate behaviors organization desired (Eisenberger et al., 1990)<sup>[13]</sup>. Voice behavior would be appropriated behavior to change organizational status. Such voice would contain the discretionary verbal communication of ideas, suggestions, or opinions with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009)<sup>[18]</sup>; LePine& Van Dyne, 1998<sup>[7]</sup>). According to social exchange theory, employee in order to return servant leader’s cost and being valued, they can speak up to leader for useful suggestions for improving organizational performance. Although these perspectives indicate how leaders’ behavior toward the group influences followers. Self-efficacy seems to be build a bridge between servant leadership and voice behavior. On the basis of this reasoning, we propose the following:

*Hypothesis 2: self-efficacy can mediate the relationship between servant leadership and voice behavior.*

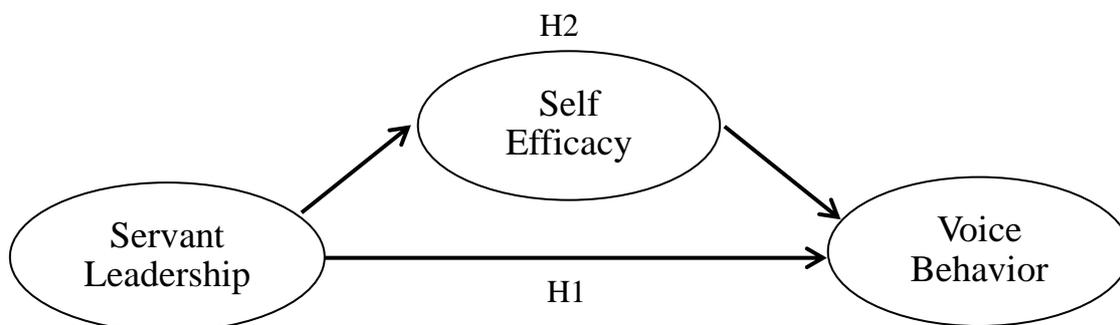


Figure 1. Research model

## Methodology

During June 1st, 2017 and January 10th, 2018, we distributed 80 supervisor questionnaires and 560 subordinate questionnaires and we received the 68 valid supervisor questionnaire (85% response

rate) and 463 valid subordinate questionnaires (82.68% response rate), all the questionnaires were mainly aim at government agencies, state-owned enterprises. We adopted both convenience sampling and stratified sampling to distribute the questionnaires. Moreover, to avoid common method bias, we adopt two times to collect our questionnaires. We firstly distributed servant leadership and self-efficacy questionnaires. About two weeks later, we distributed the voice behavior questionnaire. In the valid supervisor questionnaires, the number of male was 43, which accounting for 63.2%, while female had a number of 25, accounting for 36.8%. In the valid subordinate questionnaires, the number of male was 239, which accounting for 51.6%, while female had a number of 224, accounting for 48.4%. For the corporation scale, the number of company whose scale bellowed 50 had 7 organizations, reaches 10.3% and whose scale between 101 and 300 had 35%, while the company scale over 500 reached 26.3%. and there was only 2 organizations between the size from 51 to 100, occupying 2.9%, while there was only 9 organizations between which the size is from 101 to 300, reaching 13.2%. It can be seen that 13 organizations were remains in the size between 301 and 500, occupying 19.1%, while the biggest scale, above 500 individual scale, reaching 54.4% of the whole.

## Measures

Even though the questionnaires were in Chinese, the item scales were originally written in English. In order to keep accurate translation, we used conventional method of back translation (Brislin, 1980)<sup>[19]</sup> to translate the item into Chinese and then back into English, which can help respondent to be more easier to understand. All items were measured ranging from 1 ‘strongly agree’ to 5 ‘strongly disagree’ by Likert-five-point Scale. Regarding Servant leadership, this study used the 10-item Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) developed by Ehrhart, M. G. (2004)<sup>[20]</sup>. Sample item are “My department manager spends the time to form quality relationships with department employees” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.96. Regarding voice behavior, this study used a 5-item scale developed by Rusbult, C. E., Farrell, D., Rogers, G., & Mainous, A. G., III. (1988)<sup>[21]</sup>. Sample items like, “(this employee) would ask me to discuss the problem”, The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.83. Regarding Self-efficacy, this study used 5-point Sel-efficacy Scale developed by Gretchen et al., (1995)<sup>[22]</sup> Items were as following, including “I am confident about my ability to do my job.”, The Cronbach’s alpha was 0.92.

The statistical result would be following. Table 1, it can be seen that the coefficient among the variables were below 0.7, which means relevance degree of variables was in the reasonable range. As Table 4 showed, correlation coefficient between ethical leadership is 0.294\*\*, which support the positive relationship between them. And correlation coefficient between ethical climate and moral efficacy is 0.126\*\*

Table 2 shows that ethical climate mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and moral efficacy. From above four models, it can be seen that, in model 1,  $\beta = 0.244$  ( $P < 0.001$ ),  $\Delta R^2 = 0.089$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), which supported hypothesis 2 that ethical leadership was positively impacting on ethical climate. In model 2,  $\beta = 0.107$  ( $P < 0.05$ ),  $\Delta R^2 = 0.010$  ( $p < 0.05$ ), hypothesis 1 is supported, representing ethical leadership positively influence moral efficacy. In the model 3,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.019$  ( $p < 0.001$ ) and  $\beta = 0.079$  ( $P < 0.05$ ) and  $\beta = 0.120$  ( $P < 0.05$ ) respectively, which also can be consistent with what we predicated of hypothesis 3. All the hypotheses gain a statistical supported from data.

Table 1. Means, standard deviation and correlations

	Mean	S.D.	Gndr1	Gndr2	Age1	Age2	SL	SE	VB
Gndr1	0.48	0.50	1						
Gndr2	0.35	0.48	0.11*	1					
Age 1	1.65	0.76	-0.07	-0.16**	1				
Age 2	2.35	0.77	-0.03	-0.18**	0.24**	1			
SL	3.51	0.68	0.06	0.06	-0.07	-0.04	1		

SE	3.83	0.66	0.09	0.13*	-0.04	0.03	0.34**	1	
VB	3.59	0.74	-0.02	-0.03	0.03	0.10*	0.13**	0.27**	1

\*P<0.05, \*\*P<0.01, The indirect effect and t-values were using the bootstrapping procedure (N=463)

Table 2. Direct, indirect, interaction effect and total effects

	Effect on voice behavior	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Model 1	Servant leadership(R2=0.02)			0.15**(2.85)
Effect on mediator/criterion				
Model 2	The mediated model explaining voice behavior			
	Self-efficacy(R2=0.15)			
	Servant leadership	0.38***(7.36)		
	Voice behavior (R2=0.10)			
	Servant leadership	0.02(0.45)	0.11***(3.96)	0.11
	Self-efficacy	0.30***(4.95)		

\*P<0.05, \*\*P<0.01, The indirect effect and t-values were using the bootstrapping procedure (N=463)

In table 2, we can see that the model 1 showed the coefficient of servant leadership was 0.15\*\* (P<0.05, R2=0.02), which support the hypothesis 1 that servant leadership is positively related to voice behavior. In the model 2, in the direct effect part, the coefficient of servant leadership to other-focused climate was 0.38\*\*\* (P<0.01), which mean servant leadership was positively related to self-efficacy. Also, when considering voice behavior as dependent variable, in the direct effect, the coefficient of servant leadership to voice behavior was 0.02(P>0.1), while the coefficient of self-efficacy to voice behavior was 0.30\*\*\* (P<0.01), and the indirect effect from servant leadership to voice behavior was 0.11\*\*\* (P<0.01), which support the hypothesis 2 that self-efficacy can mediate the positive relationship between servant leadership and voice behavior.

### Theoretical and Managerial Implication

This research is one of the first to explore the voice behavior by considering servant leadership as an antecedent to motivate individuals to speak up, which is greatly neglect by previous research. Servant leaders concentrate on developing employees in the areas of task effectiveness, community stewardship, self-motivation, and future leadership capabilities (Greenleaf 1970) <sup>[10]</sup>to help employees to give some valuable and insight suggestions. It can be a good suggestion to develop other-focused leader in the organization, then to receive appreciated voice from employees to improving organizational performance. In the second, self-efficacy, referring to “people’s judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (Bandura, 1986, p.391)<sup>[14]</sup> should be pay more attention while leader would to hear from the employees. Voice would be regarded as a constructive response to job dissatisfaction and organizational problems (Withey and Cooper 1989)<sup>[23]</sup>, and also can challenging behavior that often involve risks and costs for individuals. Thus, the confidence of voice plays a vital role in this process. Our research contribute to find out that servant leadership can positively impact on employees’ self-efficacy, then in turns to influence on their voice behavior. Thus, leader need to serve first rather to lead would be a good managerial philosophy based on our finding.

### Limitation and Future Research Directions

In the first, this design feature greatly reduced the possibility of results being influenced by same-source common method bias, but may cause a little bias due to process of collection. Further research can conduct longitudinal studies to get a high response rates result, which are particularly important in our investigation because several measures were based on aggregated responses, and

aggregation to the group level is meaningful only when a substantial percentage of employees complete surveys (Timmerman, 2005)<sup>[24]</sup>. In the second, the valid sample is large enough and it cannot provide a strong test of causal relationship between servant leadership and voice behavior. Further studies are recommended to exert with a more large scale of sample and focus on a specific industry to conduct relevant studies. Last but not least, more psychological mechanism and organizational culture need to be explore based on our research model, like organizational identification, other-focused climate are suggested be investigate in the future.

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