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Impact of Servant Leadership on Public Service Motivation of Civil Servants: Empirical Evidence from Vietnam

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Abstract

Servant leadership has been noticeable in the last decade in the leadership literature on account its focus on serving others first. The target of servant leadership is not the organization, but rather the followers and their development and also the ability to motivate others to become servant leaders. Serving leadership has been recognized as a leadership philosophy that addresses ethical concerns, which is linked to ethical leadership. This study aims to investigate the relationship between dimensions of servant leadership and public service motivation of civil servants. Data were collected from civil servants working in public organizations at district level in Ho Chi Minh City of Vietnam through survey forms. The research hypotheses are tested by factor analysis and regression. The results report that 7 dimensions of servant leadership positively affect public service motivation in the following ascending order: Empowerment, standing back, forgiveness, humility, integrity, accountability, and courage. On the other hand stewardship has an insignificant impact on the role of leading and supervising. Our study contributes to the existing literature on servant leadership as well as public service motivation by throwing light onto a so-far neglected transitional country like Vietnam. Thereby, this study proposes a number of implications for the leaders to improve leadership style to enhance public service motivation of civil servants.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Public Service Motivation, Civil Servant, Vietnam

JEL Classification Code: M10, M12, M53, M54

1. Introduction

Citizens more and more demand a high service quality in their daily interaction with public organizations (Luu, 2017). Only when civil servants have the motivation, can public services be improved. Although employees in both private and public organizations can be motivated by material incentives and intangible rewards, those who are interested in working for the public sector can be thought of as attaching more significance to serving others and displaying more ethical tendencies (McCarthy et al., 2019), and considering

less emphasis on material rewards than those in the private sector (Anderfuhren-Biget et al., 2010). In recent years, the public sector in Western countries has emphasized the concept of public service motivation (Chen et al., 2014; Kim & Park, 2017). The public service motivation has a core content which is the feelings/motivations to perform meaningful works for the community and society (Taylor, 2008); it transcends the personal interests and aims at public benefit and values (Kim, 2017). Many factors are affecting the motivation of public service, in which, the managers with their leadership style play an important role in stimulating and motivating the subordinates, which later has a great influence on the performance of public organization (Olesia et al., 2014). In the public sector, effective leadership is the foundation for an organizations' ability to adapt rapidly to the ever-changing conditions in the business environment and to enhance public service quality (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Moreover, leaders can stimulate employees' motivation by providing the required resources and by designing working conditions that boost objective fulfillment and job autonomy (Aboramadan, 2020).

Servant leadership has attracted much attention in the last decade because of its focus on serving others first

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(Salem et al., 2020; Lapointe & Vanderberge, 2018). Servant leadership has been recognized as a leadership to ethics, morality, and virtues (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Parris & Peachey, 2013). This leadership is considered as a natural model of public sector organizations. This is mainly as a result of the leaders in the public sector are thought to have more powerful intention to serve the community in comparison to leaders who chair private organizations (Slack et al., 2019).

Increasing numbers of such studies have shown the relationship that exists between servant leadership and organization performance, and individual outcome (Kaya & Karatepe, 2020; Langhof & Guldenberg, 2020). Furthermore, servant leadership is considered to bring advantages to the workplace that comprise higher engagement, higher satisfaction, higher organizational commitment, better ethical working environment, and better-performing followers (Burton et al., 2017; Liden et al., 2008). But most of the research conducted by researchers on servant leadership has been mainly undertaken for developing theoretical frameworks and also for establishing reliable and valid measurement tools for researching servant leadership empirically. There also exists a limited number of studies on servant leadership in the public sector, especially in transition countries like Vietnam, and of the relationship between servant leadership and public service motivation (Slack et al., 2019).

Hence, there are some gaps in literature in relation to servant leadership. Researchers have predominantly investigated this style leadership in western contexts (Slack et al., 2019), but given little consideration in eastern cultural contexts, especially in the public sector. Moreover, the concept of public service motivation has seldom been examined in the Vietnamese public sector (Luu, 2017). Our rigorous examination of current literature implies that the role of servant leadership and its impact on public service motivation has been largely ignored, particularly in Vietnam.

In attempting to fill these research gaps, this study aims to explore the effects of servant leadership on public service motivation of civil servants. This study, based on data collected from Vietnamese public organizations, enriches servant leadership and public service motivation literature in a non – Western context.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a literature review, resulting in the development of a research model and the proposal of hypotheses. Next, section 3 highlights the methodology. Section 4 reports the empirical results while section 5 identifies the conclusion, managerial implications as well as the limitations and future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Servant Leadership

Serving leadership has drawn the attention of many researchers and is considered as the emergent theories (Ehrhart, 2004; Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011). In servant leadership, leading others is about providing leadership while serving implies offering time, compassion, and care to people (Russell & Stone, 2002; Ehrhart, 2004). Servant leadership has an essential role in motivating employees to carry out the tasks to help organizations achieve its goal (Adiguzel et al., 2020). The target of servant leadership is not the organization, but rather the followers and their development (Russell & Stone, 2002) and also the ability to motivate others to become servant leaders (Greenleaf, 2002). Serving leadership has been recognized as a leadership philosophy that addresses ethical concerns (Carter & Baghurst, 2014), which are linked to ethical leadership (Parris & Peachey, 2013). It attracts previous research interest in the organization, as a leader who puts the needs and interests of others first to gain organizational efficiency (Lapointe & Vandernberge, 2018; Newman et al., 2017). There are some key characteristics of attitudes and behaviors of servant leaders, namely being fair and open, creating and maintaining trust amongst employees, and providing opportunities for them to develop in their career (Eva et al., 2019). Servant leadership also boosts the organization's sense of justice, its ability to collaborate with trust, and creativity among followers (Parris & Peachey, 2013; Van Dierendonck et al., 2014; Suong et al., 2019). Ehrhart (2004) stated that servant leaders sacrifice themselves to create positive lives for others.

2.2. Public Service Motivation

The public service motivation that originated from public management (Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015), was first mentioned by Rainey (1982), in an attempt to resolve the difficulties of the public administration crisis in the United States in the 1990s (Bellé, 2013a). Public service motivation literature claimed that public sector employees had a unique set of values that differentiated them from their private sector counterparts (Ward & Stevens, 2020).

Public service motivation is considered as “an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (Perry & Wise, 1990) and later combined nonprofit and other non-governmental organizations (Ward & Stevens, 2020). Perry and Hondeghem (2008) believed that the underlying intent for public service motivation is the readiness to serve to make things better for everyone and society. Public service

motivation is the source of behavior and action that achieve public service results.

Vandenabeele (2011) stated that public service motivation is about beliefs, personal values, and attitudes that go beyond personal interests, motivating individuals to engage in beneficial activities for the community or society. Public service motivation plays an important role in the public sector (Kim, 2009; Kim & Park, 2017). Public service motivation has become one of the most essential structures (Brewer, 2011); creating outstanding features in public management (Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015); is a useful tool for the government to implement human resource management in public organizations (Bellé, 2013).

2.3. Servant Leadership and Public Service Motivation

In the process of developing the servant leadership concept, Laub (1999) was the pioneer to measure the concept and this was subsequently adopted by many researchers such as van Dierendonck (2011); Tischler et al. (2016). However, the main limitation of Laub (1999) is the length of the scale with 60 observed variables, which can cause many difficulties for the respondents, leading to unfavorable responses. To overcome this limitation, van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) introduced eight components of the servant leadership, including (1) empowerment, (2) accountability, (3) standing back, (4) humility, (5) authenticity, (6) courage, (7) interpersonal acceptance, and (8) stewardship.

2.3.1. Empowerment and Public Service Motivation

Empowerment is the concept focused on motivating people to develop (Conger, 1989). Empowerment proposes to share power through trust and encourage followers to have autonomy in making decisions (Liden et al., 2008; Page & Wong, 2000). Empowerment also has a positive effect on encouraging information sharing, innovation, coaching for innovative performance (Konczak et al., 2000; Ha, 2020; Siswanti & Muafi, 2020); personal development (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Huang et al. (2017) demonstrate that empowerment negatively impact the feelings of impairment, stress, discord, disunity and later contribute to improving public service motivation. The following hypothesis is thus formulated:

H1: *Empowerment has a positive effect on public service motivation.*

2.3.2. Accountability and Public Service Motivation

Accountability means holding people accountable for the performance they can manage (Conger, 1989). This

creates a mechanism by which people are held responsible for outcomes (Konczak et al., 2000). Accountability is the behavior that gives a person confidence in their capabilities, and influences them while they are performing their tasks (Page & Wong, 2000). Social Identity Theory and Organization-based self-esteem emphasize accountability that helps employees ascertain for themselves as being valuable and make certain contributions to the organization. This will equip them with a positive mentality, improving work efficiency, boosting public service motivation (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

H2: *Accountability has a positive effect on public service motivation.*

2.3.3. Standing Back and Public Service Motivation

Standing back is about the prioritizing for the benefit of others (Ehrhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2008), it shows a willingness to sacrifice self-interest to benefit others (Page & Wong, 2000); helping others develop the knowledge and skills to support (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005). It also creates a friendly working environment, making employees' satisfaction and commitment (Thompson, 2002; Tischler et al., 2016; Nguyen, 2020). Therefore, the following research hypothesis is proposed:

H3: *Standing back has a positive effect on public service motivation.*

2.3.4. Humility and Public Service Motivation

Humility is the ability to view the success or failure from a proper perspective (Page & Wong, 2000). Humility is the proper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of a people, and a humble servant-leader focuses on being open to admit that one is not infallible and can make mistakes (Morris et al., 2005). They also understand the employees' strengths and weaknesses and help them to overcome those limitations. Research results of Thompson (2002); Tischler et al. (2016) show that humility will positively affect relationships with others, which later impact public service motivation. Therefore, the hypothesis is stated as follows:

H4: *Humility has a positive effect on public service motivation.*

2.3.5. Authenticity and Public Service Motivation

Authenticity means being honest with yourself, expressing who you are, your intentions, your commitments (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005). It promotes consensus, internal solidarity, stabilizes, and demonstrates ethical standards

(Ehrhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2008). The authentic leader creates an empathetic environment for the employees to work in. The more they identify themselves within the environment, the more satisfied they will be (Liu et al., 2015). From the above arguments, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H5: *Authenticity has a positive effect on public service motivation.*

2.3.6. Courage and Public Service Motivation

Courage is about the ability to take risks and find new approaches for old problems (Russell & Stone, 2002). In organizations, courage is shown by reviewing and trying to change conventional working models, leading to pioneering behaviors to implement creativity and innovation (Russell & Stone, 2002). In other studies, courage is shown in vision, communication, persuasion, and motivating employees to perform (Liden et al., 2008; Beck, 2010; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005); it has a negative impact on the turnover intention (Kashyap & Ranghekar, 2014). Besides, Kilmann et al. (2010) argued that the less courageous a leader is, the less the employee is satisfied in the job, resulting in a decrease in performance and productivity (Loke, 2001). Therefore, a research hypothesis is proposed:

H6: *Courage has a positive effect on public service motivation.*

2.3.7. Interpersonal Acceptance and Public Service Motivation

Interpersonal acceptance is considered the ability to understand and empathise with others (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Moreover, interpersonal acceptance is

also about being able to forgive the negative comments and feedback one receives. This is very important for the servant leader, because they will create an atmosphere of trust, where even if the employee makes mistakes, they will be forgiven and accepted (Beck, 2010). Hence, it will create a good working relationship between the leader and the followers (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005); minimizing workplace negativity, creating a harmonious working environment, and improving work performance (Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2015). Therefore, the hypothesis is stated as follows:

H7: *Interpersonal acceptance has a positive effect on public service motivation.*

2.3.8. Stewardship and Public Service Motivation

Stewardship means to be responsible and obligated to the common interest (Block, 1993). Furthermore, stewardship is closely related to social responsibility, loyalty, and teamwork. A leader with stewardship builds a unified spirit in the organization and has a sense of social and ethical responsibility, and will contribute effectively to the development of the community (Beck, 2010; Ehrhart, 2004). The authors propose the hypothesis:

H8: *Stewardship has a positive effect on public service motivation.*

2.4. Research Model

Based on the eight dimensions of servant leadership that affects public service motivation, the research model to be analyzed is illustrated in Figure 1, which expresses all eight hypotheses.

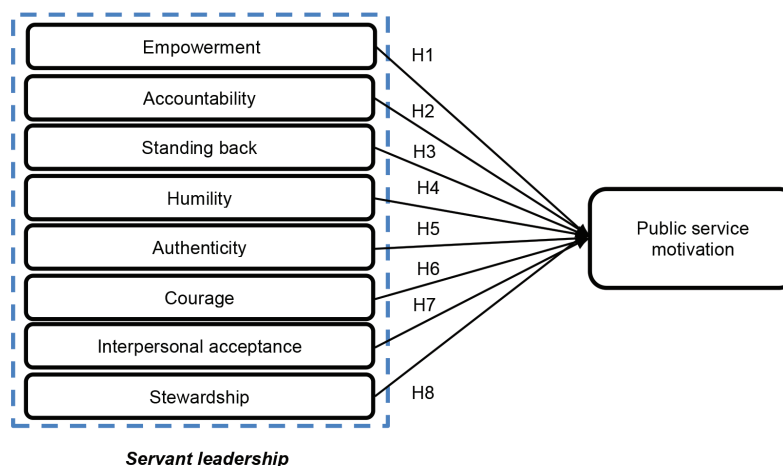


Figure 1: Research Model

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and Data Collection

Data were collected from civil servants working in public organizations at the district level in Ho Chi Minh City of Vietnam through survey forms. Because official data for the population of civil servants in Vietnam is not available, it is impractical to certify the representativeness of the sample applied. Thus, we employed a convenience sample to overcome this problem. The total sample following this procedure includes 192 valid responses.

3.2. Measure

The research instrument contains 36 questions. Because all the scales are in English, we must translate the scales into Vietnamese. Some of the terms in the scales were edited to make the meaning clearer. All the scales of servant leadership were measured with five items taken from van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), including empowerment with seven variables, accountability with three variables, standing back with three variables, humility with five variables, authenticity with four variables, courage with three variables, interpersonal acceptance with three variables, and stewardship with three variables, while the scales of public service motivation is based on Bellé (2013b) with five variables. This study used a 5-point Likert scale, type (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

4. Results

4.1. Sample Characteristics

As illustrated in Table 1, 56.77% of the sample was male, and 43.32% was female. In terms of age, most of the

respondents were between 30 and 45 years old, at 51.04%, followed by those who were over 45 years of age, at 31.77%. Most of the participants had acquired a bachelor's degree. Nearly 57.3% of respondents had work experience from 5 to 15 years.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were conducted to investigate the nature of the data and variables. Table 1 illustrates the values of minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation of these variables.

4.3. The Reliability of Scales and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

To test the reliability of the scales for variables, the study adapts Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. After deleting item EM6 because of its item-total correlations is $0.251 < 0.3$. Thus, all measures resulted in higher than the threshold of 0.7. The results of the reliability analysis are demonstrated in Table 1.

Then, the study conducted EFA for independent variables. From 30 items of eight independent variables, after the first rotated around, eight components are extracted and one item is deleted (HU3) because of low factor loading (< 0.5). Table 3 indicates the second round result of exploratory factor analysis. The eight factors of independent variables are extracted at least Eigenvalue of 1.480, all factor loadings are higher than 0.5, ranging from 0.677 to 0.861. The highest cumulative coefficient is 68.579%, and KMO coefficient is 0.754.

4.4. Correlation Analysis and Multiple Regression Analysis

Correlation coefficients are used to quantify the level of close relationship between two or more variables. The absolute value of the correlation coefficient closes to 1 when the variables have a tight linear correlation. Table 4 shows that the independent factors have a positive correlation of 0.161 to 0.576 with the dependent factor. Courage and accountability have a strong correlation to the dependent variable.

After confirming the acceptability of the measurement model, the estimation of the regression model is performed. The estimated results are shown in Table 5. This table details the results of the multiple regression model to test the relationship between the dimensions of servant leadership and public service motivation. VIF indexes vary from 1.044 to 1.1177 (less than 10) and tolerance indicators are higher than 0.1, which indicates very low multicollinearity among the variables.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

		Frequency	%
Gender	Female	83	43.23
	Male	109	56.77
Age distribution	<30	33	17.19
	30–45	98	51.04
	>45	61	31.77
Education	Bachelor	165	85.93
	Master	27	14.07
Working experience	<5 years	37	19.27
	5–15 years	110	57.29
	>15 years	45	23.44

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Between the Study Variables

	PSM	EM	SB	AC	IA	CO	AU	HU	ST
PSM	1								
EM	0.163*	1							
SB	0.320**	0.241**	1						
AC	0.519**	0.076	0.225**	1					
IA	0.419**	−0.020	0.135	0.276**	1				
CO	0.576**	0.027	0.184*	0.202**	0.216**	1			
AU	0.455**	−0.014	−0.004	0.122	0.099	0.277**	1		
HU	0.293**	−0.066	0.009	0.080	0.061	0.063	0.112	1	
ST	0.161*	−0.104	−0.093	0.008	0.185*	0.085	0.074	0.156*	1

Table 5: Regression Analysis

Independent Variables	Beta Coefficient	t value	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
EM	0.125	2.978	0.003	0.929	1.076
AC	0.305	6.991	0.000	0.864	1.158
IA	0.191	4.368	0.000	0.861	1.161
SB	0.136	3.124	0.002	0.862	1.159
CO	0.349	7.938	0.000	0.850	1.177
ST	0.067	1.593	0.113	0.921	1.085
AU	0.277	6.487	0.000	0.904	1.106
HU	0.201	4.848	0.000	0.958	1.044
Adjusted $R^2 = 0.686$	Durbin – Watson =1.914	F value = 53.133		F sig. = 0.000	

The adjusted R^2 of the regression model of 0.686 implies that 68.6% of the variance of the dependent variable is generally explained by independent variables in the model. The F -value with significance at $p < 0.001$ indicates that the outcome model is very suitable for the collected data, and there is a good fit between the dependent variable and predictors (F value = 53.133; F sig. = 0.000). Seven independent variables are affecting the dependent variable at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.05$). There are seven factors that positively affect public service motivation. They are ranked as following orders: Courage ($\beta_1 = 0.349$); accountability ($\beta_2 = 0.305$); authenticity ($\beta_3 = 0.277$); humility ($\beta_4 = 0.201$); interpersonal acceptance ($\beta_5 = 0.191$); standing back ($\beta_6 = 0.136$); and empowerment ($\beta_7 = 0.125$), whereas stewardship (QG) has no statistical significance (p -value > 0.1).

The results of relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable in the regression model lead to the conclusion that the hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, and H7) cannot be rejected.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

Through a survey of Vietnamese civil servants, this study shows that 7 dimensions of servant leadership positively affect public service motivation in the following ascending order: Empowerment, standing back, forgiveness, humility, integrity, accountability, and courage. The impact levels are different, but with high reliability 99%. Nevertheless, stewardship has no significant statistical impact. Our research is one of the pioneer attempts to test the impact of servant leadership on public service motivation in public sector. Our study contributes to the existing literature on servant leadership as well as public service motivation by throwing light onto a thus-far neglected transition country like Vietnam.

This study provides evidence that some dimensions of servant leadership have positive impact on the public service motivation of civil servants in the context of Vietnam. This means that these factors are predictable and can be enhanced by improving the influence of leadership.

First, the managers need to encourage and create opportunities for their employees to take charge of their work, using their capabilities to finish their work, allow them to participate in decision-making, help them find solutions for their work, and motivate them to improve.

Second, the leader articulates a compelling vision for the future, encourages two-way exchange in communication, creates a secure, friendly climate, provides coaching, support and development, followers are likely to improve public service motivation. Also, the managers need to acknowledge, listen to employees, evaluate work results correctly, and reward good performance promptly in front of their colleagues. The recognition of the individual's contributions, as well as the appreciation, will have a decisive impact in fostering the public service motivation of civil servants.

Finally, managers need to have faith in employees' performances, trust employees more in their productivity and give them greater job responsibility, help them gain more confidence to complete their jobs; and pay attention to the strengths and weaknesses of each individual and from there take the appropriate initiative to help employees overcome their limitations and achieve success. Besides, leaders need to build the role model of a leader with prestige and integrity; promoting greater emotional intelligence, and understand employees' feelings.

Despite some implications for the managers, this study has several limitations, which furnishes chances for future researches. Firstly, the data was collected in a convenient way because of the lack of access to all civil servants working in the Vietnamese public sector. For the generalizability of the results and the findings, future researchers may adopt other forms of sampling. Secondly, the study applies the cross-sectional data relating to the particular point of time and thus does not support findings across time. Given the Vietnamese public sector as the context of our study, the validity of the model cannot be ensured for other countries.

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