

## Servant Leadership as a Predictor of High School Principals' Organizational Trust<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate servant leadership as a predictor of high school principals' organizational trust. A correlational research method was utilized in this study. The sample population consisted of 103 subjects, of whom 52 were male and 51 female. Page and Wong's servant leadership questionnaire and Ellonen, Blomqvist and Puumalainen's Organizational Trust questionnaire were used. Cronbach's alpha was 0.90 for the servant leadership questionnaire and 0.93 for the organizational trust questionnaire. Pearson's correlation coefficient and stepwise regression were utilized for data analysis. Results revealed that there is a positive and significant relationship between servant leadership and organizational trust. Stepwise regression analysis revealed that among the components of servant leadership, components create a spirit of leadership (35%) in the first step while the prospective component (6%) in the second step was the most predictive of organizational trust. In fact, these two components together explained 41% of the variance in organizational trust.

**Keywords:** *servant leadership, organizational trust, principals, high school*

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## **Introduction**

One of the main components of management is leadership; leadership has been widely investigated as one of the important factors affecting an organization. The successes of an organization in achieving preset goals, the amount of staff effort for the success of the organization and the impact of the leader on staff depend on leadership behaviors and leadership style. Leadership is the most important issue in the field of organizational behavior and human relations (Rezaeian, 2005). Educational leadership requires, firstly, a work environment and the interpretation of the definition of objectives, preparation and implementation of programs, effective guidance and training activities, to cooperate actively and dynamically transform a system, and secondly, strengthen them by helping the people who are involved in teaching and learning, innovation and working with them effectively. In such circumstances, the blossoming of talents and abilities are secured (Alagheband, 2010). The overall project of a leader acts in a way that it is picked up by the staff in a process called a leadership style. A leadership style reflects the way of thinking, worldview and the leader's character (Mirerzaei, 2013).

Service to others is an issue older than the new concept of servant leadership, but statistics of official opposition of leadership and service within a structure in the new era are attributed to Greenleaf (Hayden, 2011, as cited in Khorshid, 2014). Reviewing this style of leadership in order to develop a theoretical framework involves preparation, which qualifies the basis for the classification and valuation of the characteristics of the servant leader, which is used to help managers. Therefore, the issue of servant leadership is very important for all organizations where the leadership style provides the potential improvements in organizational leadership in most environments (Hassanpour, 2004). Servant leadership is defined by some positive features and the absence of some negative features. Positive features include: a) to serve, b) leadership, c) prospective, d) develop others, e) empowering others, f) team building, g) shared decision-making, and h) alliance, whereas negative features include: a) abuse of power and influence, b) pride and egoism (Page & Wong, 2003).

The concept of trust and its issues have been increasingly studied by organizations for the past few years. The importance of trust in organizations is obvious today because communication and cooperation between people requires trust. In an era when relationships between individuals and groups have degenerated and are rapidly changing, trust, which is mainly based on inference and interpretations about motivation, personality and conscience of others, is the pivotal issue for organizations, which ensures their growth and survival. Trust is important because

principals are looking for understanding on how to create an effective cooperation in organizations (Tayler, 2003). Greenleaf believes that trust is a turning point for servant leadership, as legitimate leadership starts with trust. He points out that only the people with solid experience in the service of their own organizations can be trusted. He stresses that in servant leadership, a person is competent for leadership as a trusted servant because their lofty position as a servant could be trusted (Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010). Russell believes that trust is the essence of servant leadership (Joseph & Winston, 2005).

Gholami, Shirbagy and Hajizadeh (2009), in their research on the effect of servant leadership and empowerment of government organizations, point out that there is a strong relationship between servant leadership, organizational trust and empowerment. Their research also indicates that there is a significant difference between the perception of employees and managers of servant leadership. Studying the effect of the servant leadership style of managers on organizational trust of the staff of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Khojasteh Boujar (2009) found that the more accommodating the behavior of managers with an index of servant leadership, the more their staff would trust them. Ardalan, Ghanbari, Nasiri Valik Bani and Beheshti Rad (2013) studied the role of servant leadership in improving organizational trust with the mediator role of empowerment and showed that the direct effect of servant leadership on empowerment is positive and significant. The direct effect of this variable on organizational trust was also positive and significant. But the effect of empowerment on organizational trust was not significant.

Farhangi, Mehregan and Damghanian (2011) studied factors affecting servant leadership from the perspective of managers. Their findings suggest that organizational values have a significant positive direct effect on servant leadership and organizational structure has a direct, negative and significant effect on servant leadership. Gholami et al. (2014) studied the servant leadership style among principals in Sanandaj. The findings revealed that most teachers hold servant managers in high esteem. In a study titled identifying characteristics, traits and attitudes of servant leadership, carried out using the Delphi method, Potter (2009) found that open communication in the workplace, service to people and trust are among the most important characteristics of a servant leader.

Sendjaya and Pekerti (2010) also believe that servant leadership is strongly associated with trust. According to Joseph and Whiston (2005), there is a strong relationship between servant leadership and trust in supervisor and organizational trust. They also believe that servant leadership has effects on organizations and help to build trust between individuals and organizations. From the perspective

of Story (2002), trust is a fundamental characteristic of servant leadership. Servant leaders empower and inspire others, create modeling honesty and integrity in the organization. Although trust is an essential element of leadership, it also has an element of uncertainty; e.g., trusting others often leads to frustration. Patterson (2003) revealed that a perception of servant leadership is positively correlated with organizational trust. Burke et al. (2007) found that if trust in leadership is higher, the organizational trust level also increases. Daley and Vasu (1998) in a study examined the central role of political managers and leaders in fostering trust. Results indicated that the staff's higher positive assessment of leaders' performance leads to higher levels of trust. The main objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between servant leadership and organizational trust of high school principals and based on this objective, the following questions were posed and tested:

Research question 1: Is there any relationship between servant leadership and its components and organizational trust and its dimensions?

Research question 2: Which components of servant leadership allow for anticipating high school principals' organizational trust?

## **Methodology**

A correlational research method was used in this study. The population included all high school principals in Zahedan city in the 1994/1995 school year. The sample size included 103 people, 52 male principals, 51 female principals. On the basis of the sample size according to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), executives were stratified based on size and simple random sample. Characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the sample (N=103)

Variables	G.	F	%
Gender	Male	52	50.5
	Female	51	49.5
Level of Education	B.A.	84	81.6
	M.A.	19	18.4
Teaching Experience	-10	40	38.8
	10-15	39	37.9
	+15	24	23.3

Variables	G.	F	%
Management Experience	1-5	26	25.2
	6-10	45	43.7
	+15	32	31.1

For the purpose of this study, two questionnaires were used, which included Page and Wong's (2003) servant leadership questionnaire and Ellonen, Blomqvist and Puumalainen's (2008) organizational trust questionnaire.

The servant leadership style questionnaire is used to assess servant leadership style. The servant leadership questionnaire measures 7 dimensions of servant leadership in the form of 35 questions such that every 5 items assess an aspect of servant leadership and answers to each question are identified on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.84 by Aghababaian (2014) and 0.94 by Baghersalimi, Kelidbari and Hassanpour (2010). In this study, Cronbach's alpha test result to determine the reliability of the questionnaire was equal to 0.90.

According to Ellonen, Blomqvist and Puumalainen (2008), the organizational trust questionnaire is used to measure organizational trust. The questionnaire measures three dimensions of vertical, horizontal and institutional trust. The questionnaire include 21 questions, where the first seven questions are about trust between employees (side trust), second seven questions are related to employees' trust in the leader (vertical trust), while the third seven questions are related to organizational trust (institutional trust). The response scale was determined using a Likert scale within five options, i.e., from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.8 by Ellonen et al. Also, the reliability coefficient reported by Shirazi et al. (2012) and Fazelet et al. (2011) was 0.93. In this study, Cronbach's alpha test result to determine the reliability of the questionnaire was equal to 0.93.

For statistical analysis of data, calculated mean, standard deviation, Pearson correlation coefficient and stepwise regression test were utilized.

## **Findings**

*Research question 1:* Is there any relationship between servant leadership and its components and organizational trust and its dimensions?

**Table 2.** Determining the relationship between servant leadership and its components and organizational trust and its dimensions with the use of correlation coefficient (N=103)

		Lateral Trust	Vertical Trust	Institutional Trust	O.T (Total)
Developing and Empowering Others		-.051	.180	.144	.096
Power and Pride (Vulnerability and Humility)	r	.391**	.436**	.422**	.465**
Authentic Leadership	r	.405**	.430**	.516**	.483**
Open, Participatory Leadership	r	.448**	.357**	.435**	.436**
Inspiring Leadership	r	.484**	.494**	.613**	.594**
Visionary Leadership	r	.395**	.486**	.561**	.535**
Courageous Leadership	r	.296**	.423**	.510**	.459**
S.L (Total)	r	.479**	.577**	.656**	.628**

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results in the table above show that there is a significant positive relationship between all the components of servant leadership and organizational trust dimensions. The highest correlation coefficient belongs to servant leadership with institutional trust ( $r = 0.656$ ), while the lowest correlation coefficient belongs to the component of courageous leadership with lateral trust ( $r = .296$ ).

*Research question 2:* Which components of servant leadership allow for anticipating high school principals’ organizational trust?

**Table 3.** Predicting organizational trust through servant leadership components (N=103)

	R	R2	Adj.R2	Std. E	B	$\beta$	F	Sig.
1	.594a	.353	.346	8.27927	1.963	.594	54.997	.001
2	.638b	.406	.395	7.96690	1.413	.427	9.075	.003
					1.037	.286		

1a. Inspiring Leadership

2b. Inspiring Leadership + Visionary Leadership

In order to investigate the contribution of the components of servant leadership to elaborate the changes in organizational trust, stepwise regression methods were employed. The results reveal that the components of building the leadership spirit have entered the equation and futurist leadership has entered in the second step. As can be inferred from the table above, in the first step, the component of building the spirit of leadership alone explains 35% of the variance in organizational trust. But in the second step, component of building the leadership spirit along futurist leadership explains 41% of the variance in organizational trust.

## **Discussion**

Generally, it can be concluded that the managers who use the servant leadership method are people who induce a shared vision between members of the organization in school, have the capability of stimulating others and encourage others to make their activities. Given the key role of managers in the development and empowerment of others, they should involve the staff of the organization in decision-making and inducing the spirit of leadership, allow the staff to enter the professional aspects of their job. Servant leadership pattern is a relatively new model in leadership and it includes the value of people in organizations.

The results obtained in the above study reveal that there is a strong significant relationship between servant leadership and organizational trust. Moreover, there is a significant positive relationship between servant leadership and all the components of organizational trust and also between all the components of servant leadership except developing and empowering others with organizational trust. The result of the study is consistent with part of the results of Gholipour et al. (2009), Salimi et al. (2010), Khojasteh Boujar (2009), Ardalan et al. (2013), Sendjaya and Pekerti (2010), Joseph and Whiston (2005), Story (2002), Peterson (2003), Su Song and Yong Lee (2009), Brecko et al. (2007), which demonstrated a significant correlation between servant leadership and organizational trust. Therefore, it can be concluded that with increasing size and characteristics of a manager or servant educational leader, organizational trust also increases. Also, the evidence of stepwise regression shows that building the spirit of the leadership component and futurist leadership is the most anticipated of organizational trust.

## Conclusion

The following suggestions can be made: Department of Education programs should be designed and implemented to promote and disseminate the culture of service among managers; Department of Education managers who revive the spirit of servant leadership in their working environment and give special attention to employees' material and spiritual needs should be praised; by performing activities such as empowerment, participatory management and giving independence to their staff, managers should provide terms and conditions of organizational tasks in such a way that employees perform their tasks with intrinsic motivation; school administrators should develop collaboration tools and knowledge sharing in the way that meets the needs of teachers. To build trust between teachers in schools via open and transparent and honest communication, news release, participation of teachers in affairs, honesty and mutual trust between managers and teachers, and to create and develop a sense of security on the part of management at the school level is possible; giving attention to the impact of organizational trust on the servant leadership style is essential in formulating future strategies. Also, for cultural infrastructure and creating a culture of trust, it is recommended that programs should be designed and implemented to help create an atmosphere of trust in schools; and to establish educational workshops and seminars on the use of the servant leadership style and its impact on organizational trust.

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